JOSH ROGAN

MIKE MILLER AND THE WARLOCKS OF BUCHAREST

(Previous editions known as
Mike Miller, Son of Pendragon)

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For further information, contact Josh Rogan at:
John.michael.haines@outlook.com

Set in Verdana throughout.

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1

A Bedazzler Bedazzled

IGNORANCE IS BLISS, so they say. For one young boy, thin as a rake but with an unmatching overgrown crop of curly ginger hair – ignorance certainly was bliss. The often mucky, grubby, grimy, cut and bruised but very happy Mike Miller, and that was just from his daily game of football with his pals (and his enemies), was blissfully ignorant of many things. This included the struggle between good and evil involving many of his long dead ancestors and their foes, stretching as far back as King Arthur's time over fourteen centuries ago.

To his family, friends and neighbours in and around the town of Barnswick in the county of Kent, Mike Miller seemed – most of the time – to be just like any other young boy; but Mike Miller was no ordinary boy.

Mike Miller's parents were just an ordinary hardworking couple: Mike's father, Jack, was a bus driver, and his mother, Elsie, was a district nurse. Mike, their only child, did not want for anything in life but neither was he spoilt: he had similar things to most other children, did similar things to most other children, and his ratio of both obeying and disobeying his parents was much the same as any other children – particularly other young boys. He wasn't really badly behaved, but he did mess up newly mopped floors with his muddy football boots and he was forever losing coats, ties, and the odd piece of homework.

To his parents Mike could be very hard work, but they loved him dearly and he them.

*

On Mike's eighth birthday a strange looking old man in long flowing robes turned up at the house, this was just as Mike's birthday party was ending. As the last of the jelly and cake covered boys and girls with jam-matted hair left for home, the old man asked to speak with Mike's mum and dad about an important matter – a very important matter indeed.

The conversation between the three, with Mike hastily despatched to bed, still with jelly on his nose, blancmange down his ears and ice cream up his sleeves, lasted all of seven minutes and nineteen seconds. The meeting ended with Jack Miller shouting at the old man and telling him to leave his family alone and never to bother them ever again.

Although Mike had heard the shouting he couldn't work out exactly what it had all been about, plus he was too tired after the most enjoyable day of his life to worry as to why his parents had been shouting at an old man he had never seen before – and was not likely to ever see again – so he thought. . .

*

Time went by – then the strangest thing happened: a few weeks before Mike's eleventh birthday the old man turned up again, although this was late at night and Mike was already fast asleep in bed.

The old man and Jack Miller – with Elsie staying out of danger further into the hallway – began to row on the doorstep, but on this occasion (although after much arguing), Jack strangely relented and the old man was invited in to talk things over in a calm and sensible manner.

The old man eventually left, but things were never to be the same again for the Millers of 19 Lochinvar Road, Barnswick, in the county of Kent.

*

In the time leading up to his eleventh birthday Mike began to think that something was not quite right; he couldn't be certain but he felt as if his parents were watching his every move. They even made themselves late for work as they stood on the doorstep and watched him disappear down the road as he ran to catch his school bus; they were again on the step when he returned home again at 4:00 p.m. But this was not all.

Mike was amazed to find that his parents had suddenly become keep-fit fanatics. Part of this new found zeal saw them both jogging – well, puffing and panting and dragging their legs along – right past Mike and his friends playing football in the local park.

It was on the third hot August evening in a row of their new found zest for health and well-being that Jack and Elsie Miller – once again jogging past the now mildly paranoid Mike and his footy-playing friends, found what they were looking for. This was despite neither wanting to find anything of the sort, but find it they most certainly did.

Mike came to the conclusion that perhaps as a result of his parents' recent and highly uncharacteristic sporting excesses that both had developed some sort of a neck problem, as both his mum and dad seemed to have their heads permanently turned one way — his way. However, as it was four-four in the crucial Barnswick Bedazzlers versus Brazil game and as Brazil had a penalty to take – Mike, the Bedazzlers' goalie, could not dwell on such things at that moment.

The best player for Brazil, Donald Smith, but more commonly known as Donaldo, strode up to take the penalty. Mike knew, as did the others on both teams, that this muscle-bound, heavily-thighed ogre was actually playing his second favourite sport. Donaldo mainly preferred rugby and was the main kicker for the Barnswick Spartans Under-Elevens Boys' team.

There is one problem which is universally inherent in football games played in a park or many other places for that matter, which can never be adequately resolved: this is the lack of proper goalposts and crossbars. Although this is partially solved by the judicious use of pullovers, coats, and a whole range of children's apparel which double as the posts, there is absolutely nothing that can be done about the lack of a crossbar. As long as the ball passed in between 'Sweaty' Eric Matheson's unwashed jersey and 'Greasy' Graham Egglington's equally bacteria laden running top, then that

was it; no-one from the Bedazzlers were going to argue with Donald Smith that they should at least try to set a height limit.

Up strode Donaldo. He hit the ball with an almighty kick and gave out an equally almighty grunt. The ball rocketed towards the goal but just as quickly gained height – higher and higher it went – twenty feet, thirty feet, and higher again.

At that moment, both teams, Mike's mum and dad, and just about everyone else in the park, witnessed something that they would never, ever have thought possible.

As Mike went to dive left to try and save the penalty, instead he found himself shooting straight up into the air – he rose higher and higher and higher again.

With an almighty thud and an audible "ugh!" Mike took the flying football to his chest, smothered it with his hands, and began his equally rapid descent.

The amazed but terrified onlookers thought that this was the end for Mike, but just a few feet off the ground he slowed right down and made a gentle landing, still clutching the ball and still in front of the makeshift goalposts. He had saved the penalty.

A shocked Mike looked to the even more shocked Donaldo, to the ball, to his white-faced parents, and then up at the sky. Mike did not have time to discuss his wondrous save with either his teammates or anybody else. Before one awkward question could be asked, Mike was hastily dragged off home by Jack and Elsie, who had just had their worst fears confirmed.

An hour or so later Mike was sitting on the settee in the front lounge while his parents stood by the fireplace.

It was time for Mike to hear all about the wondrous things that his mum and dad themselves had been told. This was after a certain old man had called to the house on two separate occasions over the previous three years or so. However, neither Jack nor Elsie handled the situation very well at all.

It started with an attempt to explain to Mike how it had suddenly become possible for him to leap fifty feet up in the air and then slowly descend to the ground, defying all known laws of nature. Unfortunately, through his parents stuttering and stumbling over their words, a confused and even mildly scared Mike was none the wiser.

Mike's somewhat panicky parents decided to leave the football incident for now and instead simply try and explain to their son about his hitherto secret magic status as well as his magic ancestry; but they were no more successful in this than they had been over the penalty save.

After listening to such a bizarre diatribe and after dismissing a number of words and phrases he thought he had misheard anyway, such as *'Magic'*, or *'A sort of college for especially gifted children'*, a dumbfounded Mike did pick up on the one thing he had heard loud and clear – 'Boarding school'.

Mike jumped up from the settee.

"Boarding school! *BOARDING SCHOOL?!* What do you mean, I've got to go to boarding school?! What's up with Barnswick High?!"

His dad gulped, sighed and then tried to explain.

"Look, son – er – your mother and I have been thinking. If you end up there with Sweaty and Greasy and the gang, it'll just be football, football, football . . . you won't settle down to your studies and you'll end up working in the sausage factory, doomed to a life of poverty and misery."

"But you and Mum worked there for a while, and we're all right!"

"But son, it's an opportunity of a life time! You'll never have to worry abou—"

"Just tell him, Jack, he's got know sooner or later so it may as well be now," interjected a tearful but rational Elsie.

"Tell me what — Mum — Dad?! Tell me what?! What's going on?!" demanded Mike.

Jack gave another woeful sigh and did his best to explain.

"I-I . . . er . . . I–er . . . don't know how to tell you this, son, but – um – you are–er. . . "

"Mike, believe it or not — you are a wizard," again interjected Elsie.

"A WIZARD! What do you mean I'm a wizard?! You're not both back on the booze again are you?!" shouted a totally shocked and disbelieving Mike.

Mike's father knew he had to convince his son somehow of the truth.

"OK, Mike, sit down and let's see if we can make you believe us . . . do you remember that old man who called round to see us on your eighth birthday? He told us that. . . "

Jack Miller went on to relate all that had been said during the old man's first visit and why he had called again more recently.

The first visit had been to hopefully gain the trust of both of his parents, not only with the news of Mike's magic abilities but to explain that it was in everyone's best interests for Mike to be taken away to a school where he would be with other wizards of his own age. This wouldn't be right away, said the old man, but the time for this to happen wasn't too far off either. He explained that such power building up inside a young wizard needed to be developed, nurtured and controlled. If this did not happen then things could go terribly wrong. Even if a catastrophe was averted, there would perhaps be unwelcome attention from a world that did not understand, did not want to understand, and may even react violently towards a young wizard and his family after witnessing things, seemingly – not of this world.

Upon returning, the old man had gone into more detail with Jack and Elsie concerning their son's magical heritage. The man explained that every twentieth generation of their particular strand of the Miller family were wizards. The last time there had been a wizard in the family was twenty generations previously – thus, Mike was a wizard. He had also told of magic Millers who had done magnificent deeds many centuries ago, but also told of less honourable members of the family.

The mysterious old man had also repeated his earlier warning; but Jack and Elsie had smugly retorted that their Mike was nearly eleven and nothing remotely terrible had happened. However, that was then. . .

. . . But now, the old man's words of caution fully occupied Jack and Elsie's minds, alongside the unforgettable vision of their son, Michael, almost fifty feet up in the air, clutching a football.

An hour later and Mike had totally forgotten all about his wondrous penalty save, although this was very much related to what was now occupying his thoughts; he was a wizard and always had been. But his father still had more to tell him.

Jack went on to explain that apparently in the world of which he would soon be part of, Mike was by all accounts, very, very rich. The old man's accounts of how and why this was had been quite vague – but there it was – he was rich.

Also, Mike was to attend the apparently highly prestigious school – Hemlock Hall; although Mike and his parents only knew it was prestigious because the old man had said so; prior to his arrival they had never even heard of the place.

Mike had now learned as much of this strange new world as his parents themselves had learned from the old man, which wasn't very much at all, and what there was, was difficult to understand. Mike would be living in a world which was both parallel to and yet part of his own more familiar world.

Things were about to change – drastically. With increasing feelings of both fear and excitement, Mike Miller waited for the day on which he would begin a new school, and a new life.

*

One night after a particularly satisfying win against Brazil (a game in which Donaldo didn't even get a kick), Mike was alone in the house, sitting watching the TV. Jack Miller had gone out to pick up Mike's mum from Bingo.

Debbie Freeman, the anchor woman for the local news programme, *'Barnswick Tonight!'*, was in the middle of a news item:

" *. . . The verdict? Guilty! Mr Bongo was jailed for seven years for constant breaches of the Trades Description Act. We now have a Telly-Gram for Michael Miller of 19 Lochinvar Road, Barnswick. . .* "

Mike fell out of his seat – his heart was thumping so loudly he thought it was going to burst. Debbie Freeman looked directly at the camera and smiled.

"Hello, Mike, can you hear me?"

"Er . . . yes," replied a very timid but suspicious Mike, thinking it was one of those mad TV shows which caught out unsuspecting viewers.

"First of all, congratulations on your being accepted by Hemlock Hall: we look forward to meeting you there. You will start on the first Monday in September. Please ensure you and your parents are at 10 Downing Street by one o'clock in the afternoon."

"10 Downing Street! But that's the Prime Minister's house!" exclaimed Mike.

"I know!" squealed Debbie. "Isn't it great?! Ahem. Anyway, all will become clear. And please do be on time because otherwise we will have to bring you here by the Tardy Dragon. Trust me, this way's better!" The usually staid, ruthlessly professional newscaster, Debbie Freeman, was all beaming smiles and giggly as a schoolgirl. "I've got to go now, Mike. Oh, by the way, just to avoid confusion: my real name is Jacinta Morse and if you haven't already guessed, I'm the secretary at Hemlock Hall. Bye, Mike, see you soon."

Debbie, or Jacinta, smiled and blew a kiss at the camera. The kiss floated through the TV, changed into a rare species of butterfly, flew around the room three times, changed back into a kiss and landed on Mike's cheek, making a rather loud squishy noise before disappearing.

"Er . . . yeah . . . bye. . . " said a blushing but astounded Mike. He looked back at the TV. Jacinta was still there, or rather Debbie the take-no-prisoners media career woman was back presenting the programme.

" *. . . Ants in your pants? Don't laugh. Steve Tasker, our man about town, now brings you this report of a renowned entomologist from right here in Barnswick who forgot his wife's birthday. Next day, his freshly ironed pants for work were playing host to an army of ferocious red soldier ants from Guyana. Steve. . .* "

After settling down again after getting such a fright, Mike just couldn't wait to start his new school and new life; but he did have many questions for which he had not yet found the answers:-

'If I'm rich, where is the money?'
'What about holidays?'
'Would he see his parents again?'

– but Mike knew the answers to these would have to wait.

*

The weekend came – the last weekend of his old, familiar and it has to be said – very happy life.

On Sunday evening, his friends, although they knew that Mike was off to boarding school,were puzzled at his vacant expression. They were also puzzled as to why the Bedazzlers had just lost to Brazil ten-zero, although none had forgotten the save of the universe from a previous match. Donaldo, wearing his best rugby boots, had even managed to blast four penalties past a very distracted Mike Miller; disappointingly for the Bedazzlers, these had also been unarguably beyond Sweaty and Greasy's still unlaundered apparel.

After the match, Mike gulped, held back a tear and simply said, "See ya, lads", and began to walk off home as did most of the other players. However, Sweaty Eric Matheson and Greasy Graham Egglington, belying their rough image and their membership of the great unwashed, ran after Mike and offered their hand to him.

After proper goodbyes had been said, Mike gulped again, trudged off home, turned back and waved, and ran off home with tears tripping his face.

It was only his parents explaining a little more of his life ahead which eased Mike's last minute doubts, understandable doubts brought on by having to leave his friends – and his footy – behind. Mike found he was to come home at Christmas, Easter and for the summer holidays – not bad, not bad at all; plenty of time for a league full of matches for his beloved Bedazzlers against Brazil.

Mike also found out that he could leave at any time, although if this was to happen then Mike would have to be de-wizardised – for ever. If, however, he stayed at Hemlock Hall until he was eighteen and graduated from there, he could then choose to live and work or continue his studies in either world, or flit between both whenever he chose.

Mike hardly slept a wink that night.

2

The First Day

MONDAY MORNING CAME.

"Mike! Mike! Come on, get up! Didn't you hear the alarm?!"

Elsie Miller tweaked Mike's toes which were sticking out of the end of his quilt.

"Eh! Wha' . . . oh, Mum – pack it in! I'm not a baby!" Mike sat up, rubbed his eyes and jumped out of bed.

After a frantic early morning which saw the whole family munching toast, slurping coffee and checking and rechecking everything, Mike finally had all that he needed and they made the fifty mile car journey to London.

Although his parents were surprisingly unsurprised at the rendezvous point, they were very definitely concerned over their son's future happiness. His dad could only say again and again, "Are you sure you're going to be all right, son?" While his mother issued and reissued a stream of orders, instructions and warnings about –

behaving himself. . . doing as he's told. . . working hard. . . washing behind his ears. . . washing all over. . .

But this eagerness to see her only child settle into his new life was punctuated with the earnest plea of, "Come straight home if you are unhappy".

Through misjudging the traffic, they did not arrive at Downing Street until 1:30 p.m. They stood by the railings which prevent general access to Number 10 and the rest of the official residences, hoping that someone would know exactly who they were – and why they were there.

A policeman spotted them, said something into his radio, and approached the railings.

"The Millers? Barnswick?" asked Constable Creek.

"Ye-ye-yes," replied Jack, very hesitantly.

"Step this way, please. Hurry now," said the policeman as he opened up a little gate in the middle of the railings. They walked right on up to Number 10.

With a nod from PC Creek to his colleague standing outside, the front door was smartly opened. The Miller party were invited in and were led along the hallway to a connecting door at the far end.

"OK, son, it's just through there," said another policeman, while muttering, "Huh! Citizenship Awards Day!" The more knowing PC Creek just smiled.

Mike thought that maybe he was expected to continue on his own and say

his goodbyes at the door. He turned to his mum and dad with an awkward look on his face.

"Er – it's all right — Mum — Dad, it's best if I sort myself out now. I don't want anyone thinking I'm a . . . er . . . well – you know. . ."

Mike could not decide between mummy's boy or cissy so said neither.

His mum hugged and kissed Mike as if she thought he was never coming home; his dad shook his hand, wouldn't let go, but then fought back the tears and hugged him.

Mike took his luggage from his dad and went through the door. He found himself in a large office with oak panelling all around, bookcases on one side and with a large window on the other.

Through the window Mike expected to see a hive of government activity, with be-bowlered, be-brollied and pinstripe-suited civil servants at the constant beck and call of the Prime Minister. What Mike did see were fields, sheep, cattle and hills.

Mike was suddenly shaken out of his musing.

"Michael Miller of Barnswick, Headmaster," came a voice from the right.

"Yes, I know, I've had more than a little problem getting this young fellow here. Welcome, young Michael, remember me?" said the old man with long flowing robes and wearing a large pointed wizard's hat.

Mike wheeled right around and looked over to see a vaguely familiar face sitting behind a large oak desk. The face smiled, and Mike remembered where he had first seen the old man.

"You! Er – I mean, yes, sir – you came to my eighth birthday party!"

Mike heard a little chuckle from by his side. He turned to see a tall thin man with a thin black moustache and with long but well-kempt black hair and wearing matt black robes. Mike looked back to the old man who was now blushing, a little, but still smiling.

"Yes, I suppose you could say that . . . mind you, all the jelly had gone, most disappointing, most disappointing indeed. So, young Michael, let's see if we can – where are your parents?" said the old man, suddenly changing tack upon realising that Jack and Elsie were not with their son.

"I-I . . . er . . . told them that . . . er. . . " replied a flustered Mike.

"Come, come, young Miller, we encourage our pupils to be proud of their parents. You are proud of them – are you not?" said the man in black.

"Yes . . . er . . . yes, sir – of course I am."

"I am very relieved to hear it! Shall I – Headmaster. . . ?"

"Yes, if you would please, Professor Creek. Thank you."

With that, the man in black, Professor Ezekiel Creek, went off to look for Jack and Elsie Miller.

Mike thought an apology was due, but Professor Winch, headmaster of Hemlock Hall just smiled and gestured with his hand as if to say, "It doesn't matter". This was just as Professor Creek returned with a highly flummoxed Mr and Mrs Miller.

"Ah – a spot of confusion there, sorry about that. Come in, come in, do sit

down. Will you join me in a drink?"

Professor Winch held out a bottle of sherry and looked to Michael's parents and smiled. Jack looked to Elsie, Elsie shrugged her shoulders, and Jack looked back to Professor Winch.

"Er – yes, please, I think we will, just a small one. Thank you."

After being directed to place his luggage along the wall to the right of the office door, Mike sat in the chair nearest to the window and contented himself with a cola.

Soon all were seated around the headmaster's desk discussing what was to happen next and what was expected of young Michael, including what to do should any problems occur.

The subject of money was broached, but to Jack and Elsie's relief they were assured by the headmaster that all fees for the whole of young Michael's expected seven year stay had been paid in advance and in full. Although it wasn't primarily the school's business, Professor Winch further assured Michael and his parents that they would receive a full explanation of where his fortune was housed, and how he could procure more funds as and when he needed to do so.

Michael found out that he was to be taught perfectly ordinary subjects as well as a host of strange new subjects all linked to magic in some way. He also learned that HemlockHall had immediate and near-exclusive access to all the amenities anyone could possibly think of. This was courtesy of Hemlock Village, of which the school was but one part.

Mike was to learn that the village was first of all noticeable for its shape, if a village can have a shape – it was circular.

The headmaster briefly explained that the village consisted of a road which ran right around the perimeter of the school. Along both sides of this strange circular high road was a wide variety of homes, shops and businesses. These included a bank, a post office, public houses, cafés, hotels, and an array of other little retail oddities and private housing which, along with their tenants and proprietors, Mike would become acquainted with in the years ahead.

Jack and Elsie were reassured by Professor Winch that although the students were allowed in the pubs they were not allowed to drink alcohol. He admitted that this rule was occasionally broken but all students who did so received appropriate punishments. His parents gave Mike a brief but stern look, the meaning of which was only too clear to all.

After declining the offer of another sherry, Mr and Mrs Miller felt it was time to leave their son to his new custodians and to begin his new life. With tears in their eyes they hugged and kissed him, made him promise to write, said goodbye, thanked both Professors Winch and Creek, and then made ready to depart.

On their way out they passed the Prime Minister and his entire cabinet – who amazingly did not notice them at all. ("No change there, then," thought Jack, smiling).

Mr and Mrs Miller went home to an empty house.

"So, Michael, I hope you will settle in quickly, in fact, I am sure you will. Professor Creek, I think that as young Mr Miller here just about managed to avoid a rather chilly journey on the Tardy Dragon, I think you should take him along to meet his fellow pupils before taking the guided tour of the school."

"Yes, Headmaster. Come along then, Mr Miller, this way."

Mike, after being told to leave his luggage where it was and that it would be sorted, followed Professor Creek out of the same door as he and his parents had used to come in, which was the same one his parents had also left by. On walking through he found that it did not lead him back to Number 10 Downing Street, but instead brought him out into a large, circular room or perhaps hall. This was known as the Main Hall, but as round-shaped as it was, it was the only hall in the school.

Mike found himself among a noisy throng of students stood in the centre of the hall. While Mike became one of the lumpen masses, Professor Creek walked to the front, designated as such (as it was circular), purely by the fact that there were a number of tables set out to make one long row, there for the use of, set out at the top of the room. The tables were directly and diametrically opposite two large wooden doors which Mike would soon come to know as the main entrance to the school.

The Professor went around to the other side of the tables where he was soon joined by the rest of the staff, and, seemingly from nowhere, the headmaster. To Mike they looked just like the usual grouping of male and female, young and old, pleasant and dour, as one would expect to find among the teaching and support staff of any school.

Professor Winch looked around and beamed at the new intake of students.

"Welcome, everyone! Welcome to Hemlock Hall! My name is Professor Winch – but you can all call me Professor – no? Never mind, never mind, Winchy it is!" proclaimed the professor, who was half expecting at least a minor chuckle but never got it. "Hmm . . . fair enough. Well, now . . . I am the Headmaster of this first-class wizarding establishment, even though I say so myself, and this immediately brings me to a very important question, a very important question indeed. . .

"Why – do you think, are we all gathered here – in this hall – in this school – you, me, and my colleagues standing alongside me – today?

"There are actually many answers to this, if truth be told, but the one over-riding thing from which all else is derived is this – duty.

"I freely and firmly proclaim that – along with my deputy and great friend, I am proud to say, Professor Creek, as well as our fine teaching staff, and last but not least our highly professional support staff, that it is *our* duty – a duty we all take great pride in – to help you along the way through one of life's most difficult phases – young adulthood. Equally, it is *your* duty to make the most of the opportunities which, from this moment on, will be presented to you each and every day.

"I won't keep you long, as I like to remain true to a traditional saying in the

school – We don't prattle on here at Hemlock Hall.

"Now – most of you will be here with us for seven years – that's a long time, especially at your tender age. However, we hope to mould you, to blend you, cajole you even, into becoming all that you can be, to borrow an apt phrase from our non-magic military friends, but we hope to be able to do this with respect, and with nothing but concern for what is best for you. I hope, or rather – I *know* – our faith in you will be rewarded by your hard work, your diligence and application in all that you do – and by you putting your trust in us each and every day while you are here.

"Another of my favourite sayings on these new starter days, as many of your parents and siblings who came here themselves may already have told you, is – We don't make wizards out of young adults, we make adults out of young wizards. We do magic here because that is our heritage, but more importantly, for you to become all that you can be while you are with us and beyond is a far more important achievement, and a very fine one which will put you in good stead throughout the whole of your lifetime.

"As I've already said, we don't prattle on here at Hemlock Hall, and with that in mind that concludes my hopefully warm welcome to you all. I will now hand over to my good friend and colleague, Professor Creek, who will shortly commence a guided tour of the whole school. Thank you."

As is the norm with any such gathering of new pupils at a new school, there was a mixed and generally muffled reaction. There was a half-audible "Thank you Headmaster" from some, interspersed with even more garbled inaudible responses from others. There was an over-zealous, "THANK YOU HEADMASTER!" uttered by a few of the new students, while many maintained an awkward silence. This potpourri of a response then became a sea of amazed looks and gasps. This was as Professor Winch walked off to the side of the hall and towards a small side door, but he did not seem to reach it. Instead, to the amazement of the students, he just disappeared into thin air.

Deputy Headmaster Professor Ezekiel Creek did his best to emulate his friend and leader – minus the disappearing act. He too beamed at the confused gathering before him.

"The first thing I am going to say to you all, is – please – do not worry. I know the first day in a new school is a daunting experience, but I promise you that all of the staff will do their utmost and more to help you all settle in as quickly as possible.

"So – the first thing I would like you all to do is, please form an orderly queue. Once you have done this then walk past each of the four tables in front of you and pick up a sheet of paper from the different piles on each. When you have done this we will then commence a guided tour of the school and of our affiliated community which surrounds the school, and which is of so much help to this fine institution and its present incumbents, yourselves now included."

Although it is always the way, there was a little uncertainty among the

children upon being asked to form a queue of their own volition. However, after a few bumps, trips and shoves, an orderly queue was indeed formed and the whole of the new school year's intake walked past the tables as instructed, picking up their sheets of paper as they passed.

After collecting his first sheet, Mike immediately noticed that it was totally blank. He left the queue and nervously walked across to Professor Creek.

"Er . . . excuse–" began an uncertain Mike, but at the same time he saw Professor Creek smiling kindly down upon him.

The professor gently shook his head and gestured with his eyes for young Michael to get back in line, walk on, and show at least a little more faith in the system.

Soon all had their papers and had informally regrouped in the middle of the hall.

"And so, onto our glorious school. First of all, if you please look to the west. . ."

The professor went on to give the new pupils a very brief potted history of the school, which was soon followed by a guided tour.

The building itself was rather an odd shape. Although the exterior stonework gave it somewhat of a gothic look its shape was anything but. From the outside, Hemlock Hall looked like a huge mud-hut of the type inhabited by the ancient Britons; it was far more sturdier of course, the solid granite saw to that, but a mud-hut shape it was. For those who did not pay attention in their first year history lessons, maybe it's easier to say it looked like a huge, family sized meat pie with a domed top.

Inside had a peculiar, concentric circle feel about the place. The Main Hall was surrounded by a crookedy, winding staircase which connected the different levels of the four-storey building to each other.

The top floor was used mainly for the different house dormitories and common rooms. The classrooms, the library and the lecture rooms were split between the other floors, while the Main Hall doubled as the refectory as well as it being the official school venue for receptions of one sort or another.

All floors had different bathroom and toilet blocks allotted to staff and to the different school houses. Each floor had its edge jutting out at different distances towards the centre of the hall – the top floor jutted out least and the first floor jutted out most, putting the look of the interior at odds with the outer visage.

The classrooms were in the main similar to classrooms in any school, anywhere: a blackboard, a teacher's desk, individual desks for the students, coat pegs and the ubiquitous untidy storeroom. However, the exception to this was the Cauldron Skills classroom: this housed four, huge, badly stained and mis-shaped cauldrons, and twenty smaller cauldrons on tables spaced roughly evenly around the room. These were also in a less than pristine condition but by all accounts were still usable.

Then there were the laboratories. Although these were primarily used for perfectly normal science lessons, these were run by the same staff who also

taught Magic-Science topics, hence the legend, *'Combined Sciences'*, on the laboratory doors. The labs' were just like those found in most schools: rubber tubes, gas connections, and the permanent throat-tickling chemically smell which would have been conspicuous by its absence.This also gave the students a sharp reminder that there was to be no escaping non-magic subjects.

To the side of the school was the Outdoor Combined Sciences Annexe. It was here that botany and other natural science subjects and topics were taught. This was basically an allotment and a greenhouse.

The final port of call on the guided tour was the Arena, some two-hundred yards away from the main building. There were gasps of amazement from the students, although there were some smug but still audible whispers along the lines of "See? I told you so". This was from students with prior knowledge of Hemlock Hall, gleaned, usually, from older family members or friends who either also attended the school or had done so at one time.

The Arena was an exact replica of the old Wembley Empire Stadium, the home ground for many years for the England football team. This boasted two aspects that were the real thing and not just reproductions – the famous twin towers, and the scoreboard. These were transported from London upon the demise of the once state of the art stadium.

The pitch was no longer marked out for football as football wasn't played there anymore – at least not officially. The game played week in week out on the pitch centring this famous sporting replica was – *Empires*, a game played only by wizards.

The students were guided out of the Arena and back in to the Main Hall, and the professor went back to his station behind the tables.

Before long, every major aspect of the school and information relating thereto had been shown or imparted thoroughly. This included finding out the names of the four school houses. These were: Camelot, Equinox, Amulet, and Solstice, with the pupils in each chosen at random. This occasionally caused problems as every so often two or more friends or relatives would start at the school together but not get the same house. Professor Creek went to great pains to stress that this should be seen as a positive thing as a little independence never hurt anyone.

With the exception of Professor Winch all of the staff were again alongside him, and he again addressed the students.

" . . . And so that concludes the tour of the school itself. As for our little village surrounding the school, we find it works best if all new starters take this in at their own leisure, although a prefect will show you the ropes before leaving you to your own devices. . .

"As it is new starters day some of the shops stay open a little later, so please feel free to avail yourselves of their services – bar one, of course – once the formalities are finished with here today. . .

"Right then, ladies and gentlemen, please look to the top sheet of the papers you were given earlier. . ."

Mike, as did the others, held up his sheet of paper and looked down, and was amazed by what he now saw. Despite the sheets being totally blank when the children had picked them up from the tables in the hall earlier on, each sheet was now displaying all of the information needed to get off to a good start.

Printed on the top sheet near the top of the page was the student's name and school house. Mike Miller was in Camelot House. Underneath this was a timetable for all of their lessons, with just enough room at the bottom to briefly mention outings and field studies which were to be finalised as the school year progressed.

The next sheet listed what items were needed for which lessons. The third was the full list of school rules. The fourth and final sheet had the dates of the three main holidays and how the students were expected to get home and back again at these times, which was not via the Prime Minister's broom cupboard – that was a special arrangement for new starters and that was it.

"I think that is it for the moment," summed up Professor Creek. "Please repair to your dormitories as quietly and efficiently as possible. Once you are settled in, then please wait for a prefect to come and show you the village, but be sure to be back down here by 8:00 p.m. The First-Night Supper is always a special occasion, so, festival robes, please – no exceptions. And please read the notes you have been given very carefully, they are very important if you wish to get off to a good start tomorrow. Goodbye for now!"

As with the earlier request to form a queue, there was initial reticence to move at all, but soon there was a sea of young, eager first year students clomping in every possible direction and up and down every staircase as they all made their way to their respective dormitories. Mike just about managed not to trip and fall as hordes of students clomped past excitedly.

Although Mike managed to stay upright, a girl, quite tall with long brunette hair and pleasant features, almost fell right over as she was accidentally pushed in the back by one of the more excitable new starters. Just as she was about to fall forward and bang her face on the hard metal stairs, Mike grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her back up; the girl turned round, looked at Mike, and blushed. With a muffled thank you, she turned to the front, looked down, and carried on her hopefully uneventful journey to her dormitory. Mike just shrugged and walked on.

Mike soon found his own dorm' on the top floor. The entrance was a big oak door but there didn't seem to be any lock on it. This was something that also puzzled the other new tenants as they were all standing around talking and asking each other if they knew how to get in.

There were now so many of them that they had formed a queue of sorts, right back along the passageway to the top of the staircase.

Mike and most of the other students also realised something else, something strange; not only were the boys waiting to gain access to the house dormitory, so were the girls.

After five minutes or so of hushed musings, an older boy, a prefect, came

rushing up. He was a tall, gangly fellow with a mop of untidy black hair. He was also very flustered.

"Sorry! Sorry – my fault – I was just talking to Professor Creek about the first Empires game of the term . . . anyway . . . here now . . . let's crack on. I'm sure all of you are eager to see your new homes, yes? OK then. . .

"Now – entry is simple – you just say the name of your house and the door opens. Please remember that only Camelot House students are allowed in here – no, no, that's not quite right . . . ah, yes, this sounds better: only those who live in a particular dormitory can gain direct access to it – yes – I think that says it. However – and I am sorry to confuse you even further – there are exceptions: all staff, prefects and even all upper sixth students over eighteen can gain entry to any dorm' in any house. This is a safety and security measure which will ensure the right help is rapidly on hand, in the event of any sudden emergencies or unusual occurrences.

"I know I can prattle on a bit, but we're getting there, we're getting there. Another thing to remember is: when you are in a group, don't act like a bunch of wallies and all say Camelot, there's no need. There is a one yard limit all around the entrance so if one of you says it you will all get in. Any questions?" A big beefy lad with a red face but seemingly not too bright piped up.

"Er – how do we get out then?"

"And your name is. . . ?" asked the prefect.

"Leo Thorpe – er – er – sir."

"Don't be daft, Leo, I'm a prefect, not Winchy. I'm Tom Carpenter, everyone, and I'm in the Fifth Form and a prefect. As for getting out – no problem. From the other side there is a perfectly ordinary handle – and it does open the door – so if you are sneaking off to the kitchens at three in the morning there's no need to yell all over the place and wake the whole school up – nor on the way back I may add. . ."

"Oh," said Leo, looking and sounding very foolish.

"Now now, big fella, you weren't to know, don't worry."

"What if we have friends from other houses with us?" asked one of the others.

"Smarty pants, eh?! Only joking!" replied a jaunty Tom. "Yes, forgot about that one . . . yes, no problem. If you vouch for them they can indeed go into your dormitory, but the door will only open for a Camelot student. However, please remember that in the event of trouble, perhaps a fight – or maybe theft and it seems to involve the visitor, the word vouch can have serious consequences for not only the culprit, but also for the – er – voucher – er – no – that's not right . . . ah, yes, for the person who vouched for the troublemaker, if indeed it is a troublemaker. Hmmm . . . yes, I think that says it. Now – er. . ."

"Erm – sorry to interrupt you – er – Tom, but – er – where is the girls' dorm'?"

The girl who said this was very nervous and blushing, but as none of the

other girls present seemed to be willing to ask she had taken a deep breath and had just blurted it out. This was the same girl that only shortly before had nearly tripped on the staircase.

"I wondered when someone would ask that," lied the sometimes forgetful Tom.

"Your name, Miss. . . ?"

"Oh – er – Abigail Trent – er – Tom."

"Don't worry, Abigail, all will become clear and I assure you all that there's nothing to worry about in the least. So let's make this a bit of a ritual, eh? Who wants the honour of opening the door of your dormitory for the very first time?"

Mike's hand shot straight up in the air; he didn't really know why then or later but shoot up it did.

"What's your name, then?" asked Tom.

"Mike Miller – er – Tom."

"Just look at the door, Mike – and say Camelot."

Putting his hand up to volunteer was one thing, but the reality of talking to a door was quite another.

"Er . . . er. . ."

Tom opened his mouth, put his hand to his face and made a yawning sound. The awkward group of adolescents yearning to get settled in all laughed as one, which eased a little of the tension.

Mike, well used to joshing from his fellow Bedazzlers and far worse from the Brazil team back home in Barnswick, smiled, looked up, and shouted – "Camelot!"

"Excellent!" said Tom, rubbing his ear, which again drew forth laughter. "OK then, just push the door."

Mike moved forward and gently pushed the door. The door slowly swung open. They were in.

Mike walked into his new home slightly ahead of the others, but he suddenly found that the big lad who had spoken earlier was by his side.

"It's great this, isn't it!" enthused Big Leo to Mike.

Mike looked around at the most bizarre site he had ever seen. After a few seconds of stunned silence he broke into a great big grin.

"You're right there, mate! It's fantastic!"

Mike and Leo led the way along the huge dormitory which seemed to stretch on for ever and seemed as wide as it was long – but considering the type of accommodation found within, it needed to be.

Stretching beyond what the eye could see and more than one deep across the breadth of the dormitory, were what could only be described as an incredible variety of seemingly luxurious abodes. There were replica castles, palaces and stately homes, and large manor houses of the type eternally referred to as the Big House, in every period drama ever written featuring serfs and toffs.

Each one was a copy of a famous historical and / or aristocratic abode. Of

course they were all far smaller than the originals, but all still had scaled down moats and drawbridges, even around those that strictly speaking would not normally have them.

Keeping the students from falling in to any of the moats were dry-stone walls running along the length of the dormitory, and along the smaller intersecting paths which allowed access to those whose abodes were not immediately to the sides of the central walkway.

Above each was a sign proclaiming the title of the residence. Written underneath the title of each abode was the name of the student allocated to live in such regal or aristocratic mediaeval splendour for the next seven years.

It soon became clear as to why there was no traditional segregation of male and female students: as each student literally had their own castle or palace, this was segregation enough.

The hushed musing of only moments earlier rapidly gave way to a sea of noise, with the excited young wizards and witches chatting and clacking away to each other over such an unexpected surprise for them all, but all were again brought to order by Tom Carpenter.

"OK, everyone, please listen carefully. You will find, or may already have done so, that your names are listed under the title of each residence. Please find your own gaff as quickly as you can. I'll give you twenty minutes to get settled in and then I'll be back to show you around the village. OK, see you later."

Although Tom was not in the least concerned, only a few bothered to acknowledge his departure or thanked him for his help, but the students were not being rude they were just simply overawed; although some of the less streetwise did ask, "What's a gaff?"

"OK then – here goes, let's see if I can find my – er – gaff," said Mike.

"Er – look, Mike – how do you fancy getting your stuff sorted out as quick as you can and meet me back here? We can sit and talk somewhere while we wait for Tom," suggested Leo.

Mike smiled and breathed a sigh of relief; he was making a friend. Leo did not seem too bright, but he had a warm, friendly way about him; that was good enough for Mike.

"Yeah, why not," replied Mike, "I haven't got much stuff to put away so I'll only be a few minutes. Come on, let's see whether either of us are in Camelot Castle. It was a castle, wasn't it?"

Leo just smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Mike wasn't in Camelot, but Leo was. Mike was in Grwych Castle, but at least it was next door to Camelot. Although it only occupied his mind for a second, Mike wondered how it was that the most famous of all stately abodes were all free for the use of by the new intake; he couldn't begin to think why so dismissed it from his mind. What he and his fellow new starters would not know of until well and truly settled in, was that these were the names given to the first abodes when the school was new; Mike and his

fellow new starters had just happened to start at the beginning of a new seven year cycle of occupancy of these replica top-drawer abodes.

Mike walked through the gap in the dry-stone wall and along the drawbridge and found himself looking at an oak door. As the castle was in miniature the door was nowhere near the size it would be if it was the real thing. However, it still had to be big and wide enough to allow a big, strapping sixth former to gain entrance – one day: Mike was only eleven and quite slim – but obviously he would grow and rather quickly at that. He pulled back the metal slat of the door and pushed, the door opened easily and Mike walked in.

If Mike and the others were staggered by what they had seen on entering the dormitory, they all must just as quickly have been brought back down to earth.

As Mike walked in what he found was not what he had expected. There was no huge hallway leading to an even larger hall with a huge dining table bearing a dead pig on a serving tray with an apple in its mouth. The surrounds and walls were, sadly, not decked out in suits of armour, stags heads and fire-torches. Instead it was a perfectly ordinary single room; a very nice room, quite modern and spacious – but nonetheless an ordinary room one would expect to find in any ordinary house which had the not always problem-free task of accommodating a young child. Mike just shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

The bed seemed comfortable enough, and this was soon confirmed as Mike flopped right down onto it.

As Mike looked around he saw that against the wall to the left was a small sink, above which was a little bathroom mirror. Against the opposite wall was a small, combined wardrobe and dressing table. And in the middle of the room was a small table and two chairs and a larger easy chair in the corner. To the right of Mike's bed was a small bedside cabinet.

There was a window at the far end. As Mike sat up and looked out, he saw gentle, rolling green pastures which seemed to stretch for miles, punctuated by a hill here and there, and in the distance what appeared to be a farm. In some of the fields were cattle, in others there were sheep and horses.

Mike had a thought – where were they exactly? Downing Street is in Central London, but they seemed to be out in the middle of the countryside. Mike realised that the answer to this mystery would have to wait.

Mike noticed that his luggage had indeed been sorted – well, transferred to his abode, and so jumped up and began to transfer the precious few belongings he had brought with him onto the hangers and shelves in the wardrobe, and into the drawers of the dresser.

After a couple of minutes Mike was done and decided to go and look for Leo. He left his abode, walked back along the drawbridge and back down the main passageway. Mike was surprised to find that Leo was already waiting for him.

"Bit of a swizz that, wasn't it? Not even a round table!" rued Leo.

"Yeah, suppose so," replied Mike. "Still, it's comfy enough."

"Yeah, 'tis. Look – erm – Mike, I noticed when we came in, there seems to be some sort of sitting area further along. Shall we have a look?"

"Might as well."

Mike and Leo walked further along the dormitory. There were still students who had not found their new homes and there were others who had unpacked quickly and were standing around talking to their neighbours over the miniature outer fortifications. In reality these were more dry-stone walls again acting as a barrier to prevent anyone from falling in any of the moats.

They walked on for what seemed an age but was only five minutes. No sooner had they passed the last of the stately abodes than they were hit by a blast of sunlight. It was so strong that both Mike and Leo had to shield their eyes until they were beyond the powerful beams. They now found themselves in a huge conservatory, so big it had room for a great many small round tables, each with its own set of wicker chairs. The view from right around the glass-walled room was of the same rolling pastures, grazing animals and distant hills that many of the students could see from their rooms. The view up above and through the glass ceiling was of a brilliant, clear blue sky. The conservatory, or the Camelot House common room as the students would soon come to know it as, was filling up fast as most of the other Camelot students had also decided to congregate there.

Mike quickly scanned the room and saw a table with just one other person sitting at it, a girl – Abigail Trent.

"Mind if we sit here?" asked Leo.

Abigail blushed and just shook her head. No sooner did this happen when it happened again. This time, a small boy covered in freckles and with very unkempt blonde hair was the one asking. Mike and Leo just nodded, while Abigail looked down, said nothing, and again blushed as red as a beetroot.

"'Ere, I ain't gonna bite yer!" said the untactful blonde haired boy. "What's your name?"

Abigail went even redder, just about muttered her name, and looked down again.

"Well, I'm Jack France, but me mates at home just call me Dutch."

Mike and Leo both laughed out loud.

"I thought calling someone Dutch meant their name was really Holland?" asked Mike.

"Yeah, I know, but we're all crap at geography," replied a grinning Jack.

The three boys couldn't be sure but they thought they heard a snigger from the blushing Abigail.

"That's better!" exclaimed the relentless Dutch. "I told yer I wasn't going to bite!"

This time Abigail looked at the three boys – and spoke.

"I'm sorry if I seem quiet, but I'm always nervous in a new place. I'm quite shy, actually, but I'm all right once I get to know people."

"The sooner you get to know us the better, then!" said Dutch.

Mike and Leo were really amazed by this little blonde haired scruff and the cheeky way about him, but as they were both good lads they did appreciate the warmth emanating from such a scruffy, young Cockney wag.

"So, where are you from, Dutch?" asked Leo.

"London – East 'Am to be precise. A bit rough I know, but I love's it – so's Mum and Dad. What about you lot? Oh, and what's yer names, by the way?"

"Oh – er – I'm Leo Thorpe from Leicester," replied Leo.

"I'm Mike Miller, I live in Barnswick in Kent," jumped in Mike.

Although they never meant to embarrass her again, all eyes were then on Abigail.

"Basingstoke," she said quietly.

"Pardon? Braising Steak?" joshed Dutch.

"Basingstoke!" said Abigail – very loudly – but smiling with it.

No sooner did things settle down again, when the last remaining seat at the table was spotted by another straggler.

"Anyone mind if I sit here?" politely asked the late-comer.

This was another girl. She was unusually tall, pretty, and with long, shiny, black hair. As ever with very tall girls, they tend to be either super-graceful as if they have just finished deportment classes where veritable tomes gave them headaches, or they are very awkward in manner and gait – it turned out that she was one of the former. She was – like Dutch – also super confident and immediately introduced herself.

"Hello, I'm Madeline Chalmers – pleased to meet you."

Madeline shook hands with the others, who in turn introduced themselves.

"Where are you from, Madeline?" asked Mike, who was half expecting her to say Liverpool as she had a trace of a Scouse accent.

"Southport. It's a coastal town in Lancashire – a bit like Blackpool in a way, but not as big and noisy. Your hair's nice," said Madeline, turning to Abigail, who blushed, smiled, and said "Thank you."

For the next fifteen minutes the five new friends chatted away about where they were from, how they came to be at Hemlock Hall, and asked each other quite a few questions concerning the school which had not been mentioned by anyone so far. This included its mysterious location, which turned out to be in a county no-one previously knew existed, at least not on their table – Lesterjestershire. This strange fact only become known because Madeline had overheard someone on another table mention it – or so she said. Neither could any of them offer any insight on the mysterious game of Empires.

As for their splendrous residii it turned out that Madeline had the most esteemed masonic facsimile possible – Buckingham Palace, although Leo in Camelot seemed to think – and quite rightly – that his was extra special too. Mike asked if anyone knew where the real Grwych Castle was, and quite surprisingly, Madeline did; it was up in the hills by a town called Abergele on the North Wales coast, just a couple of miles away from the seaside resort of Rhyl. Abigail was in Longleat House, but was thankful that unlike the real one there weren't any lions roaming around the place – although there was a

cute stuffed toy lion called Alfie, sitting up on her pillow and holding a box of chocolates as a welcome gift.

Dutch was in Leeds Castle. He commented that he had never been to Yorkshire, but was immediately ribbed by Mike (who lived quite near there), for not knowing it was actually in Kent, unlike the great city of Leeds which is indeed in Yorkshire. The small talk was brought to an abrupt end as Tom Carpenter returned.

"I thought I'd find you all in here – nice, isn't it? And I'm glad to see that you've all began that vital process of making friends. So if you will all follow me, it's time to show you around our little village. After a few minutes of showing you where everything is, I will leave you to your own devices – but make sure you are back handy as you have to change into your best robes for the First-Night Supper. Take note – this begins at eight o'clock – sharp. OK then – follow me. . . "

3

Hemlock Village

TOM LED THEM ALL back along the dormitory, out onto the landing, back down the staircase and out of the main entrance. They crossed a lowered drawbridge which spanned the moat which surrounded the school and found themselves on a circular road.

Sweeping right around the school were the variety of stores, pubs, amenities and houses earlier described to Mike. Some of these were on the opposite side of the road beyond which were the self-same rolling meadows as far as the eye could see that Mike had gazed upon from his window. The rest were on the school-side. Occupying the houses and cottages punctuating the retail premises were a number of families as well as individuals, most of whom owed their livelihoods to the school in one way or another.

The first building that came into view as they meandered along was the Post Office. This was on the far side of the lane and was almost directly opposite the main pathway leading up to the school. It was situated in an old country cottage with a little garden. The entrance was through a little oak door surrounded by garlands of flowers.

The children walked on, passing a number of small cottages on both sides of the road. Most of these had rough, rambling but nonetheless delightful cottage gardens bordering the lane.

Next was the Black Cat. This was on the school side and was a hotel-cum-public house, but which actually had the appearance of a small Elizabethan mansion.

Its wide entrance filled most of the central section, and the main door and small, narrow entrance hall led onto a large rectangular room running across the width of the building. This was the main lounge.

Two wings jutted out at right angles to the centre: one was the public bar, the other was the designated quiet lounge.

The small number of bedrooms available to the public were to the rear of the premises, beyond the main lounge. There were a few patrons in for an early evening drink, some standing at the bar, others sitting; but it wasn't particularly busy.

Following the Black Cat were more cottages, again on both sides of the lane. Further along on the far side was what seemed to the children to be either stables or a forge, or perhaps both, but there was no time to ponder this further as they now found themselves outside the Glastonbury Hotel.

The Glastonbury was another circular four-storey building, but far more pleasing to the eye than the school. Due to the size of the building – the largest in the village and set in its own considerable grounds, the

establishment could not have been built anywhere but opposite the school. The entrance was yet again a solid oak door but set in slightly as it was under a large stone-covered porch. The variety of smells, the little clouds of steam coming from some of the windows, the clatter of plates and the noisy din of expectant diners, made it obvious it was just on teatime. Within the extensive grounds were a small copse, lush bowling greens, and an outdoor picnic area.

This had taken them all more than halfway around the lane.

As Tom and his retinue meandered along on the homeward leg of their journey, they espied what was considered to be the best-kept cottage in the village, although it also happened to be the smallest. It was as if much of the available space had been given over for more horticultural purposes, and the children could see from the road that the large front garden was indeed stunning.

It certainly did not have the looked for beauty-in-chaos of a typical cottage garden, but had a fine well organised arrangement of many British and even exotic flowers and plants, shrubs and trees. The cottage itself was well maintained. Ivy covered most of the front wall and climbing roses had been trained to grow right around the doorframe.

Although the children could not see the back garden itself, they could see several rows of different types of fruit trees which had grown far higher than the cottage, their tops all swaying in the wind. The children realised that it wasn't really a garden at all but a fruit orchard, although a small one. This happened to be school caretaker Harry Gripweed's mini-orchard, which of course also meant that he lived in the quaint little cottage. As the orchard bordered the school (barring the moat), it had long been deemed a good idea to ensure there was a wall at the end of the orchard which would hopefully keep his tender succulent fruit well out of reach of any number of hungry young scrumpers. This worked well most of the time, but not always. With Harry having long accepted the fact that good swimmers and ardent scrumpers do not have to always be separate entities, the wall had indeed been scaled by more than one bold (and wet) student over the years, especially to scrump armfuls of Harry's lovingly grown huge, rosy red apples. On such occasions Harry stands in his back door vestibule unseen by the scrumpers. He puffs a few extra puffs on his pipe – smiles – and then he gives a little laugh. "Give it time, 'Arry, boy, give it time. . .", he says to himself. The time in question is how long it takes for Chinese Flipper Fruits to take effect. In Tom Carpenter's case it was eight minutes. The then first-year had embarrassingly flip-flopped around the school with webbed feet, looking like a giant bull frog. It took three days for the effects to finally wear off.

They passed Ma Halliwell's Apothecary and General Store. This was on the school-side of the road and was a ramshackle affair made of old timber and broken glass, and with jet black smoke billowing out of a crookedy hat shaped chimney. All of the newcomers looked to Tom expecting an explanation of some sort, as it was impossible to see into the store due to

the grimy windows, but this was to no avail. Tom seemed to be miles away as he led them all on at a brisk pace.

As Tom led all of the new starters further along the lane, the next particular point of interest they came across was a rather colourful affair called Aunt Hattie's Sweet Emporium. This was opposite to the school and looked a far more friendly place. The shop was shaped like a fairy tale house and the timbers were shaped and coloured like bars of rock. Tartan coloured smoke gently rose from the chimney, and the window display was full of all the sweets and confectionary it was possible to imagine. Despite longing looks from the children, especially Leo, Tom still strode briskly on.

Patty's Patisserie was next. This bordered the school and was a fancy little café with lace curtains on the small, square bottle-glass windows. Standing in the doorway was a rather snooty waiter, sneering at the children as they walked past.

Then there was the Lonely Unicorn. This was another pub and a spooky place it was, too. This was on the opposite side of the school but set further back than most of the other buildings. It was built of a very sinister looking matt black uneven jaggedy stone, and similar to Ma Halliwell's, there was black smoke belching from the chimney. What made it seem even more sinister was the seeming lack of an entrance or front windows, instead there just seemed to be one huge, jagged gash, cut deeply into the stone and which stretched right across the wall. What the children did not realise was that there were windows, but these were along the right side only. The only entrance to the pub was at the rear of the building.

As they walked on it did not go unnoticed that Tom suddenly sped up even more, and was now looking at his watch every minute or so. This gave the children no time to study the sights in any detail or even quickly peruse anything of what this strange, circular village had to offer. They rushed past more shops and stores, cottages and small businesses, and even another restaurant, before finding themselves back at the drawbridge by the main entrance. However, all was not lost.

"And that's it, folks . . . the shops and post office usually close at five o'clock, but as today is your first day they will remain open until a quarter to seven. As for the pubs, you are allowed in them but only with an adult – and even then you are not allowed alcohol – please remember that. Right, see you later. . . "

Tom walked back into the main building, and the huge throng of students began to disperse into their own little groups, each wondering where to go and what to do first.

Although first year students are, at least on some occasions, treated as young adults – they are still only eleven years old. The only possible starting point for such beings – is – the sweetshop.

"I wonder if there's any such thing as magic sweets?" asked Mike, who was surprised at the ordinariness of many things he had seen so far.

"Dunno, mate," replied Dutch, "I hope so."

They found themselves looking in the window of Aunt Hattie's Sweet Emporium.

"I think you've got your wish there, Dutch," said Abigail.

"Ah, she speaks!" joshed Dutch, to which Abigail blushed – but she smiled with it.

"Yuk! Look at that!" exclaimed Leo.

To the side of the packed, semi-fluorescent display of confectionary was a little square section of the counter, closed off from the rest of the goodies. A green and yellow sweet snake covered in icing sugar was slithering around, poking his forked tongue out and hissing at the astonished gawpers. Above the snake was a sign – '*Wiggly Spearmint Tum'*.

The snake was yanked up from the window display and handed over to a large, rough looking boy, who in return handed over a fistful of small silver coins to the assistant. The boy was obviously an older student, the first one Mike and his new friends had seen so far apart from Tom Carpenter. At that moment he was being egged on by his equally rough looking mates, and even the assistant was all agog waiting for the uproar.

"Go on, Snigger! Eat it! I've got a fiver riding on this!" said one of his gang. Although the boy had purchased the Wiggly Spearmint Tum with a swagger, his cockiness now deserted him. He looked at the sweet snake, to his jeering friends, and then back to the snake again. He knew he would never hear the last of it if he did not make good his boast.

In front of the children now packing out the shop, many of whom were new students, Snigger closed his eyes, stuffed the sweet snake into his mouth and began to chew. It took seven gulps for Snigger to swallow it all down. He then stood stock still as if waiting for something to happen, but not at all sure as to exactly what.

After a tense wait for Snigger as well as his expectant audience, Snigger's face suddenly adopted a look of sheer terror, but he was very soon to contradict this by suddenly bursting into a fit of manic laughter.

"HA HA HA HA! HEE HEE HEE! HO HO HO! STOP IT! STOP IT PLEASE! HA HA HA! HO HO! OH FLIPPIN' 'ECK! WHOAA! HELP! PLEASE, SOMEBODY, ANYBODY! HA HA HA HA!"

Although he had been told beforehand that this would happen, the sweet snake had magically reformed itself in Snigger's stomach and was wriggling around inside him at high-speed, sticking out its forked tongue and tickling his insides. The sensation was obviously the worst experience he had ever had. The snake moved around his stomach – faster and faster it went, causing the most horrible bitter-sweet sensations beyond anything that anyone could ever imagine. If this was ever classed as an alternative sport it would surely be called Extreme Tickling. It even did a slalom type manoeuvre, wriggling in and out of Snigger's rib cage.

Snigger was on the floor, rolling around, holding his stomach, laughing, screaming, going blue in the face, red in the face, purple, then a deathly white – and still the sweet snake never let up. It even shot straight back up

into Snigger's mouth, stuck its sugary forked tongue out at both Snigger's mates and all of the other mesmerised students, and then disappeared back down Snigger's gullet to recommence its gastric torment. Snigger was soon standing up again, jumping up and down, clutching his stomach, banging his fists on the counter and laughing and screaming – he ran right out of the shop and was last seen rolling around in the street, still laughing and still screaming for mercy.

"I don't think I'm buying one of them," said Mike. The rest as one exclaimed, "NOR ME!", as they finally made it to the counter.

This was at the same time as Snigger's mates came out of the shop, one smiling as he brandished a five jupiter note, another frowning as he was minus the very same.

After the rest of the equally amused and horrified boys and girls had bought their fancies and left the shop, the assistant finally turned to Mike and his friends.

"And what can I get you young ladies and gents?" asked the shop assistant. This was a man, seemingly in his late thirties (but was in fact, much older), tall but slightly built with greased black hair, and sporting the biggest handlebar moustache the young friends had ever seen. Even his uniform, if it could be called that, was ridiculous: an orange shirt, brightly coloured patchwork trousers, a green and white blazer, and a straw hat – and a rather fetching red and yellow bow tie to complete the ensemble. This was obviously not Aunt Hattie – or they hoped it wasn't.

"I know, Caramel Nose Beetles!" suddenly exclaimed the man, before any of the friends could utter a word in reply. He ducked down behind the counter but came back up only moments later, holding a box and smiling broadly. He immediately tipped the box upside down. Eight huge, chocolate-covered caramel beetles complete with pincers, fell out of the box, landed on the counter, disentangled and righted themselves, and began to crawl towards the children.

After witnessing Snigger's torment all five children came to the conclusion that the nose in Nose Beetle was no doubt to do with the consumer's nose rather than the beetle's, and politely declined the offer.

Thankfully the shop was not solely concerned with confections that torment rather than satisfy, and the new friends all pointed, decided, changed their minds, decided on something else, and then bought what they said they were going to buy in the first place. They all soon had veritable armfuls of a mind boggling array of sweets and chocolate, and all manner of edible and thankfully non-ticklish confectionary.

Before the man could ring up the totals on the till, a shrill voice rang through the shop.

"Josh Beecham! Did you sell a Wiggly Spearmint Tum after I gave you explicit orders to send 'em back?!"

"Er – I didn't mean to, Auntie," shouted a reluctant Josh, in reply to a huge mound of a woman with arms like tree trunks and a face as furious as any of

the children could imagine anyone to be furious.

"Get in the storeroom now – and start unpacking the Sugar Dragons!"

"Yes, Auntie – straightaway."

"Now, children, that will be. . ." said the sweetest old lady that ever walked this earth.

As the five finally left the shop with armfuls of teeth rotting goodies, they heard the sound of shouts, yelps, "ows", "gerroffs" and more – as Josh Beecham was again left in no doubt as to the error of his ways.

Mike was now in debt to all four of his new friends. For some reason they knew all about the legal tender needed to survive in the magic world and more importantly had magic money with them – but Mike did not. He did tell them that he was rich and that he would pay them all back in no time, but this was met with polite smiles and silence.

In between bites, chews, slurps and burps (from Leo), Mike Miller, Leo Thorpe, Jack 'Dutch' France, Abigail Trent and Madeline Chalmers all casually chatted away to each other. By this time they were on their second lap around the perimeter of the school and were taking in a little more of what this strange community had to offer. They talked about what they had seen so far – wondered what their teachers would be like – and wondered about the lessons they would take. They also told each other more of where they were from and of their friends back home – and each told the others of the day they had found out they were all wizards or witches. . .

Mike had them all enthralled with the tale of his amazing antics while playing in goal for the Barnswick Bedazzlers. Big Leo mused on the fact that he had made friends with a future England goalie . . . maybe the world's best goalie. Dutch, who was prone to flights of fancy, saw himself as a sidekick to a Super Hero – clearing the London Pickle with one leap to catch a particularly nasty villain. It didn't occur to Dutch that it was Mike who could save penalties fifty feet up in the air and not him – but such piffling, minor details never ever bothered Dutch.

Abigail thought for a few moments. She then asked Mike if there had ever been anyone in his family called Spring Heeled Jack. Madeline laughed out loud. She had painful memories of countless falls from the tall trees in her garden trying to rescue one or more of her thirteen black cats. She had just found the solution, or so she hoped.

Mike, more than a little embarrassed at the attention, expediently asked his new friends about their experiences.

Leo had known since he was nine: it was while he was running the egg and spoon race at his local primary school. Despite his generous girth holding its own wobble olympics as he ran along, he went on to win it by a mile – or near enough. For some reason he did not stop at the designated finishing line but ran on over the field – and onto the track used for senior events. This was just as the starter gun was fired to signal the beginning of the 1500 Metres Final in the AAA Championships, which were also being held on the school field. He lapped the stunned senior runners twice before finishing in

record time – two minutes and three seconds – and still with his egg and spoon intact. As had been the case with Mike, he was soon rushed home and Professor Winch was contacted immediately.

Dutch's tale was even more bizarre. He had always loved history and during a particularly boring day out at Windsor Safari Park when he was just ten years old, he wished he could have been at a famous battle to see it for real. Dutch got his wish. His dad's Vauxhall Astra suddenly relocated in time and space to become part of King Harold's advance on the invading Norman army at the Battle of Hastings. Although his parents and younger sister were speechless with terror, an enthralled Dutch was amazed to find the English army were winning the battle easily; that was until an arrow fired by one of Harold's bowmen – meant for William not yet the Conqueror himself – glanced off the windscreen and was rerouted towards none other than King Harold.

It was only the sudden appearance of an old man with long hair and robes and brandishing a wand, which saw the family resume its sightseeing tour of depressed orangutans and lacklustre lions.

As for Abigail, her experience had had a liberal sprinkling of embarrassment. The ten year old Abigal had begun to tire of the same old routine. The old routine in question consisted of going out shopping with her mum and standing there shyly while her mum talked incessantly to anyone with a shopping basket. She yearned to be noticed and dearly wished she was somebody special that the whole world adored. Shortly after hitting the High Street on the morning of her eleventh birthday (but still with her mum), she finally got her wish. Abigail's mother, who had been blocking up the narrow pavement as usual, suddenly stopped her usually unceasing chatter and strained her ears. Abigail, as did the long suffering Mrs Allerdyce, whose frozen chicken was rapidly defrosting – looked back along the High Street to what seemed to be the source of some kind of disturbance. And then it happened. . .

A toytown attired brass band, complete with Morris dancers, cheerleaders and stick twirling drum majorettes – and a parade of thousands following behind – came booming up the high street. The colourfully regaled band were playing the famed anthem *'Stars and Stripes Forever'* – but the words sung by those in the parade were rather different than the words usually sang in courthouses and at veterans' galas across the USA.

'ABIGAIL! ABIGAIL! ABIGAIL! — ABIGAIL! ABIGAIL! ABIGAI… L!
ABIGAIL! ABIGAIL! ABIGA-IL!— ABIGA-IL! AB-I-GAIL!'

Then the parade sang it again . . . and again . . . and again. Then – right in front of a highly mortified Abigail and her totally shocked mother and Mrs Allerdyce – as well as the rest of the High Street – the band and the whole parade stopped to face Abigail Trent. The cheerleaders, assisted by the Morris dancers and the drum majorettes, struck up a special cheer for

Abigail.

'WHO'S THE GIRL WHO'LL NEVER FAIL?! ABIGAIL! ABIGAIL!
WHO MAKES BRITNEY LOOK SO PALE?! ABIGAIL! ABIGAIL!'

With precision timing the Morris dancers all knelt as one, but immediately sprang back up again with pompoms waving for one last cheer.

'AB! - I! - GAAAAAAAAAIL! YEEEAAAHHH! ABIgail!'

As this once in a lifetime event had occurred only days after Dutch's changing of the history books, Professor Winch found himself a very busy man indeed.

Madeline's tale was slightly delayed while Abigail smiled and blushed at the others' reaction – they could not stop themselves laughing.

Leo, who had three chocolate bars and an ice cream on a stick in his mouth, bit into the freezing cold treat at the same time as he roared away very loudly; but the laughter came to an abrupt halt as he suddenly started choking, wheezing and going purple. It was only Madeline grabbing him around his generous waist very tightly and squeezing with all her might, which eventually resulted in the half-digested confections shooting straight out of Leo's mouth. Unfortunately, this was all over a recently shampooed, neatly combed and freshly manicured poodle which just happened to be walking past at that moment – thankfully this was without its owner.

After Leo had recovered, Madeline told them of her initiation into the wizarding world. After a particularly enjoyable tenth birthday party with her friends which had ended in a sleepover, she had waved goodbye to them all at the front door the next day. Sad that it was all over, Madeline had then wished that the world would go backwards so she could enjoy it all again. From that moment on . . . well, at least for the next day or so, Madeline's world became absolute madness. As she left for school, her parents came back in from a day's work. As she put the light on in the lounge to do her homework, her mother muttered something totally unintelligible, walked backwards, and turned the light off again. At breakfast she wanted toast but got roast beef, with her parents seeming to talk gobbledegook. Then, in the early afternoon and with the sun blazing away, she called on a friend, only for the girl's father to open a bedroom window and shout something like, "ffo realC!" while still in his pyjamas. Madeline then called into the local store for a magazine but failed to make the shopkeeper understand which one she wanted so came straight back out again. On her way home, she passed her neighbours who were all walking backwards, mumbling "gninrom dooG!" And although she knew full well that motor vehicles could reverse, she did think it rather odd that the drivers of every single car, van, bus and motorbike speeding along past her were all reversing at the same time. What was definitely a quantum leap from reality was a reversing bicycle. It was only

after she had walked past an old man with long hair and robes and who was waving a stick about, that things returned to normal.

This time there was no uproarious laughter with choking fits, just a strange, eerie feeling within each of the five new friends. This was their first inkling that magic was not always fun.

As Abigail, Madeline, Dutch and Leo resumed their excited chatter, Mike became silent and thoughtful. He was actually musing on what he had just heard from his new friends. Although he of course knew full well that the other four were all wizards and witches, at least, thought Mike, they, unlike him, came from what he could only think of as being fully-fledged magic families. Mike pondered on why their own awakenings, as Madeline had rather smugly called them, had seemed to induce panic and terror in the very people, who, presumably, would have known it was going to happen to their magical offspring one day. Mike was at least a tad off base on this, but he was to learn the full facts one day, sometime in the not too distant future.

When a child born of magical heritage reaches the day that their powers reveal themselves, or of their awakening, as Madeline had correctly called this mystical rite of passage, the experience is totally different for each and every child. They are, for some, so highly dramatic that no matter if the child is of a magical line stretching all the way back to Merlin and regardless of the fact that their kith and kin had gone through this themselves when they were young, it can still be a shock to the system not only for the children but for their parents and loved ones, or even entire neighbourhoods. Although there are reasonably frequent judicious interventions by elders of the magic community, sadly, this cannot be guaranteed. As had been the case for Mike there hadn't been a senior wizard to hand on the day, only his parents, duly forewarned and vigilant.

Mike shook himself out of his ponderings and rejoined the excited babble, which was once again at ear-splitting level.

The friends had spent that long talking about the things that had brought them all together, they did not realise that time had marched on. They had intended to call in at some of the other shops but these were now closed, and as it was past 7:00 p.m. they knew it was time to go back and get changed into their best robes.

As they walked back along the drawbridge, other parties of stragglers rushed past them to return to their very own castles so that they too could get ready for the First-Night Supper.

The five new friends all promised that they would congregate at 7:55 p.m. so they could go together to the party. It wasn't really a party of course, but it seemed like it to the children.

4

When Knights were Bold

MIKE WAS BACK IN HIS ROOM. Instead of getting ready, however, Mike just stood there frowning. Something was nagging him at the back of his mind. Then he realised – he didn't have any robes at all, let alone best ones. Not that he knew of anyway.

Mike frantically opened up the wardrobe door, and heaved a huge sigh of relief. There, hanging up on the first peg was a set of festival robes. These were basically silver in colour but with strands of burgundy and gold running down the length. He quickly tried them on and looked in the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door; they were a perfect fit, but then again thought Mike, he would have been surprised if they had been anything but.

After quickly and carefully taking the robes off and hanging them back up again, Mike picked up a towel, a bar of soap and a bottle of shampoo. He was off for a quick bath, or a shower, or whatever it was, as he had not yet been in the bathrooms.

The Camelot boys' bathroom was to the left of their dormitory.

As with other things Mike had seen that day, castles excepted, he was not at all surprised to find they were just like any other school bathrooms anywhere: damp, jaded white tiles, and a little smelly.

Leo and Dutch had also had the same idea and were already in the middle of showering.

Dutch, still amused and making full use of the acoustics, couldn't help but sing at the top of his voice, 'ABIGAIL ABIGAIL ABIGAIL!', while wasting about three quarters of a bottle of shampoo on his mop of blonde hair.

"Shush! She'll hear you!" said Mike, although almost as loud as Dutch's singing.

"Yeah, she won't leave her castle if you keep that up," agreed Leo, although he too must have been taken by the tune, as he was whistling it as he washed under his very flabby arms.

It was 7:55 p.m.

Five very smart young ladies and gentlemen adorned in their finest robes walked along the top landing, getting pushed and shoved by other groups and pushing and shoving them back in return.

They clambered down the winding staircase all the way down to the Main Hall.

Instead of the hall being set out the way it usually was at ordinary mealtimes, a great many circular tables filled up almost the entire room.

Each table had been set for five (which Mike and his four friends were rather glad about), and were covered in thick red vintage lace tablecloths.

Each place had been set with the school's best silver cutlery and the best bone china dinner services.

Filling out the rest of the available space were the staff tables. These were not circular but were three ordinary dining tables (although adorned and set just the same), which had been arranged into an L shape. The head and deputy head occupied the two top seats, a little like a bride and groom at a wedding, and the rest were seated on either side and right around the L.

A large rectangular banner had been hung high up on the wall behind the staff tables. The banner proclaimed in silver coloured gothic writing:–

'WELCOME TO HEMLOCK HALL'.

After the ubiquitous late-comers had dashed in and had found the nearest empty seats, Professor Winch rose from his seat. The deputy also rose, smiled, and gestured with his hands and his eyes for the hall to also rise as one.

"My my, you do look smart, all of you!" said Professor Winch to the duly upstanding new starters. "You are all of great credit to the school and indeed your parents, well done. So now, we come to tonight, my young friends: firstly, it is all to do with a collective sigh of relief. You are here, many great lifelong friendships are already being nurtured, I'm sure, and I sincerely hope that all of you are over that terrible feeling of apprehension that is sadly unavoidable when starting anywhere or anything anew. However, tonight we are all here to enjoy a good meal and hopefully a good laugh – although perhaps not in quite the same way – eh, Leo. . . ?"

There were gasps of astonishment, especially from Leo Thorpe who was almost as red as Abigail usually was. The students seated at the other tables all turned and looked strangely at Leo and his friends, but a little cough from Professor Creek put paid to that. The headmaster continued.

"You have all got through today, and I'm sure you will do equally well tomorrow, which is really your first day in an academic sense, so – bearing this in mind there is nothing else for me to say but enjoy your meal and the entertainment we've got lined up for you later – but more of that after the last burp – eh, Leo. . . ?"

The five friends laughed out loud at this, but Leo Thorpe did think it a bit unfair. How did Professor Winch know that he burped on average about once every three minutes? There were again strange stares from the rest, but all were soon distracted as an army of waiters and waitresses appeared from different side rooms around the side of the hall to serve up the feast. The starter was any one of a huge variety of soups, or all of them if one felt so inclined: Leo certainly did feel inclined but struggled valiantly against the odds to show at least a little decorum and so settled for just five servings. The main course was from an even bigger range of meats, fish, or vegetarian meals, and the dessert was either ice cream or fruit followed by hot drinks.

Throughout the meal the new friends relaxed and were able to talk about

everything or nothing. There were silences, too, but these were usually a result of the new friends taking the opportunity to have a nose at the pupils seated at other tables, who were just as keen to nose back. After an hour or so the meal was over and Leo did indeed burp – several times – although he did do his very best to control it.

Professor Winch rose from his chair yet again, and again the hall went to rise as one, but found Professor Creek smiling and gesturing to them that it was not necessary.

"And now my young friends, we come to the most exciting part of the evening – but first, a word of caution: whatever happens in the next few minutes I want you to remember that you are in no danger whatsoever – please remember this and please remain seated. This does not mean that you will be in any danger if you do stand up, you won't be, but it may mean yer big fat 'ead will block someone else's view!"

Unlike earlier during the welcome assembly, this time Professor Winch did get a laugh. He continued: " . . . and as I told you earlier, WE DON'T. . . !'

Professor Winch then deliberately stopped in his tracks, quickly put his hand to his ear and turned his head to one side. This was a little trick he had perfected many years earlier to catch out anyone mimicking him, although it was purely in fun and he never took offence. It was all down to the infinitesimally small delay in transmissions between the mind and the mouth, leaving anyone who planned to say or do something, totally unable to prevent themselves from still doing so. This little comic caper from the headmaster resulted in a handful of whispering voices from around the hall clearly being heard to say, " . . . prattle on here at Hemlock Hall". This wasn't magic – the professor had caught his young imitators out by applying the same principle used to determine false starts in athletics.

More laughs ensued when the embarrassed eleven year old mimics were suddenly jettisoned to fame, courtesy of seven magic spotlights letting the entire gathering know just who these juvenile parrots were, but before the last laugh had died down, the hall went black and the children couldn't even see in front of their faces.

The entire assembly of new pupils jumped in their seats as a fanfare on trumpets and bugles suddenly filled the hall. Professor Winch spoke again, but this time there was a strange, echoey quality to his voice.

"My young friends, please sit back and enjoy this evening's extravaganza. It is also your very first lesson but hopefully a very enjoyable one. Welcome to – THE HISTORY OF THE GREATEST SPORT IN THE MAGIC WORLD! — EMPIRES!" There was another loud fanfare. This was followed by several shrieks from quite a few of the more timid students, including Big Leo, as the tables seemed to move rapidly backwards and straight through a solid wall. They found themselves outside in blazing sunshine, no longer in the Main Hall and seemingly no longer in the same century. From the look of their new surroundings they seemed to have become the spectators seated around an old fashioned jousting arena.

The headmaster and his staff were no longer to be seen.

At one end of the ancient arena there was a small enclosed rostrum upon which were seated a number of very finely dressed dignitaries. In the centre were two big thrones; sitting upon the left throne was a tall, slim but muscular man in knight's armour, wearing a crown and with three golden red lions emblazoned on his tunic. A magnificent bejewelled sword lay at his side. Sitting on the other throne was a fine lady in a long flowing blue and gold dress, and she too wore a crown.

The lady held the man's hand and they smiled upon our astounded audience, or more appropriately for the moment, spectators.

On the rostrum surrounding our two be-throned strangers were other finely attired dignitaries, equally as strange to the mystified gathering.

The voice of Professor Winch again broke the silence and which again echoed, but not only that, the professor's voice was a commentary on the very things which were happening before the children's eyes. They sat there enthralled as the professor continued and the almost cinematic plot developed right in front of them.

"The centuries of the first millennium saw much darkness, fear, and sorrow: but there was one time . . . when peace reigned in these lands . . . there was one time . . . when people rejoiced, and danced, and sang, and ate and drank – and tried to kill each other in tournaments. . . (Laughter resounded right around the hall at such unexpected comic irony, but to be fair to eleven year olds who were yet to embrace such subtleties, they laughed because it sounded funny, which it was).

"It was in the middle of one such tournament – or joust – that the goodly King Arthur decided to try and stem such needless bloodshed – as well as preserve his rapidly diminishing Round Table. Upon losing five more knights in this gruesome sport, he decided there and then to introduce a new, safer form of jousting.

"After hasty consultations with Merlin, Sir Lancelot and the other knights of the Round Table, a grand plan was put together, which if successful, would result in the realm no longer losing a great many knights in tournaments. At the same time, this new and ambitious form of combat would ensure that there would still be a great spectacle for the people."

There was a pause in the narrative. The almost real characters became as still as statues, and darkness descended upon the arena for a few seconds.

As the light gradually returned aloud fanfare again had the children jumping in their seats. Their young hearts only had a few seconds to recover before they received the next shock to the system.

To incredible, almost deafening whooshing sounds (and to gasps of astonishment from both the children and the equally amazed peasantry of sixth century England), King Arthur's knights took to the air on broomsticks.

Professor Winch once again took up the tale.

"Although there had been many rumours and stories concerning the knights, the people of the realm were finally to be let in on a hitherto closely

guarded secret – the Knights of the Round Table were also wizards. It was no coincidence that many looked to Merlin as well as their king for wisdom and inspiration, and some rather ominously – instead of. However, such secret magic powers were not confined to our own brave defenders; the English knights were, for this inaugural safe tournament, joined in the air by the Magic Knights of Brittany – or, *les Chevaliers Magiques de Breton*. One-hundred and seventy-one warriors were in the air and waiting to do battle. Each of these brave knights was determined that he would be the last man standing. . ."

There was another pause in the narration as the children could see for themselves the events as they unfolded. King Arthur, still on his throne next to his queen, leaned over and whispered something to his good lady. Queen Guinevere smiled, raised a blue silk handkerchief in the air – dropped it – and the battle in the sky began.

The rules were simple – every man for himself.

The knights did not brandish their usual array of lethal weaponry, but instead were to use heavily padded jousting sticks to minimise the risk of injury – or worse.

The crowd were euphoric as the knights lashed out at each other: they soared – dived – bashed each other over the head – on the back – in the chest – and performed outrageous manoeuvres which saw some of the knights wield their jousting poles as if they were rowing paddles, whacking one opponent one way, another the other way – and bashing two more over their heads on the return movement. Others went into rolls which gave extra momentum and impact to their lunges and strikes. Others simply held their jousters out wide and rode directly in between two or more soon to be winded knights.

Each knight tried out various other novel manoeuvres with varying degrees of success. One knight, Sir Lionel de Lumiere, discarded his jouster, sat on his broomstick the wrong way round – and brandished the rather stagnant filth laden bristles right into the faces of his opponents; five were forcibly dislodged, while another three jumped off not able to withstand the terrible pong. However, Lionel himself was soon out of the contest when nine knights forewent their own rivalry and ganged up on him.

Due to the frenetic pace and dogged determination of each and every knight in this mediaeval dog-fight, more and more brave but very tired knights soon found themselves hurtling down to the ground.

One such unfortunate was Sir Etienne of Dunkirk. With a blood-curdling scream, he fell from his broomstick – not to his death – but down into a mud bath.

King Arthur had banked on the drastically extended airborne extravaganza to sate the appetites of the peasantry, and hoped they would not be overly concerned with the new safety measures – a hastily built mud-swamp to ensure a safe landing.

The joint favourite along with King Mark of Cornwall – the tragic Sir

Lancelot – stopped and hovered to brush off a speck of dust from his helmet and comb his hair. He needn't have bothered, as he was now down in the depths – covered in mud – and rueing the end of chivalry.

Within a minute seventeen more knights had screamed and careered down into the freshly made mud to join him. The anxious king looked across to the hoi-polloi, hoping hehadcome upwiththegoods –hehad.There was cheering, whooping, waving of arms and a baying for more stratospheric brutal dismounting which did indeed follow. The airborne spectacle was such an eye-fest that it mattered not a jot to the crowd that instant or even agonisingly slow death no longer followed a besmoting. Arthur sighed with relief and looked on at the continuing mayhem.

Sir Hugo of Milton Keynes also had a good run, but not that good: following Sir Lionel's example, he too flung his jouster away and rode his broomstick in an upended pogo stick style, soaring up and swooping down, and bonging as many knights on the head as he could. He spotted the biggest and strongest knight in the contest and now clear favourite, King Mark of Cornwall. Hugo knew he needed extra momentum, soared three-hundred feet up and nose-dived at tremendous speed. The lucky King Mark didn't even know he was a target. He moved to his left to avoid a side-on attack by Sir Gawain, and poor Sir Hugo plummeted at supersonic speed straight down to the ground – and at the same time turning most of the spectators into mud-monsters – they loved it.

One by one the knights fell. The noise from the crowd was ear-splitting as the only two knights left in the air sought to vanquish one another; these were Sir Bernard of Bootle and King Mark of Cornwall.

The two were only a hair's breadth away from each other when Sir Bernard suddenly shot straight up, high above the arena. He had seen Sir Hugo's valiant effort and thought with a little luck he could make it work. Sir Bernard dive-bombed the stronger but heavier and thus slower King Mark. The controlled collision worked. The muscle-bound but rotund king could not react fast enough and was swept straight off his broomstick, and he too crashed down into the mud.

The children watched as a victorious Sir Bernard was given his winner's purse by Queen Guinevere and hearty congratulations from his king.

The arena was once more a sea of mist as King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and the goodly knights all faded from view.

Professor Winch's voice again punctuated the magical history lesson.

" . . . Although in its infancy, and although there would be many changes over the centuries to bring us to the game that exists today, the game of Empires had indeed been born. . . "

What followed was a colourful time-collage of the development of the game of Empires – how it gained momentum – and how it affected for better or worse the very fabric of life as not only magic folk knew it, but sometimes non-magic folk as well. The professor's narrative described each new scene as the collage rolled along.

"For many centuries our beloved sport, verily a sport of kings, was known simply as airborne jousting . . . but real and terrifying events in our history were ironically inspired by this novel and supposedly harmless pastime, and in turn, the ensuing deadly derivations were to be the inspiration for both the game we play today, and its very name.

"As our world stretched its boundaries, we made many enemies along the way. Sadly, our magic and supposedly noble standing did not make us any less desirous of other lands and all their inherent riches, neither were our foes slow to envy what was ours.

"As man fought man, so wizard fought wizard. As many countries were won and lost, so too were our own kingdoms and realms.

"Although Arthur never intended it to be so, his idea for an airborne battle royal soon became the new kind of warfare, the adopted strategy of every warlord in the magic world – but fighting to the death was once again the norm. Jousting sticks were discarded and once more replaced by lances, swords, bludgeons and more.

"Great armies of wizards on broomsticks would attack each other in the skies – ancient races of proud warriors were wiped out overnight. There were even battles which saw thousands from both sides killed, leaving just one man alive from each side, who then fought to the death themselves.

"The remaining kings, queens and leaders of these much reduced realms knew they had no option but to hold peace talks. They knew if such carnage continued then very soon there would be no-one left to live ordinary lives, let alone fight and die. But this was still the Dark Ages – such peace talks were held simply to preserve ill-gotten gains; envy was still in their eyes.

"A sly old wizard called Zanzibar had been thinking: he allowed all of the others gathered for the hastily called peace parley in an encampment in the mystical town of Glastonbury, to prattle on among themselves, making rash suggestions which he knew would be dismissed soon enough. He waited for the first sign of temper which would be his cue to allow his planned jiggery-pokery to commence. He did not have to wait long. . .

"A Flemish knight, Barant of Ostend, drew his sword when a wild-eyed Romanian Warlock, Zemzilg, suggested that as a sign of good faith, Barant should return half of all the Balkan territories he had seized. Before Barant could answer with his sword or Zemzilg retaliate with his flail, Zanzibar muttered something under his breath, pointed a wand in each hand at both of the aggrieved warriors – and their weapons simply turned to dust and drifted off in the breeze and out of the tent. The company of so called peacemakers were stunned into silence.

"Zanzibar, a tall, black African prince in a long, flowing robe of gold and silver, stood to address the gathering – he looked the epitome of majestic magnificence. What was more amazing was that as this living breathing vessel of exotic elegance began to speak, the many nationalities present, all of whom could speak only in their own tongue, easily understood Zanzibar's every word, as he perfectly understood them. . ."

Professor Winch's voice faded away, and the children sat there as if they were in a play, watching the action and listening to the players themselves.

" . . . How may we talk peace . . . when each and every suggestion is spat at and stamped upon? How can affairs be settled . . . when to do so means to think the unthinkable . . . or to give up what hearts cannot give up? I put it to you that we cannot: it is an impossibility for each and every one of us here now to willingly give an inch to their neighbour, either in land, or in treasure, or in friendship. Let us accept this as being the permanent state of things – but – we cannot risk such levels of slaughter any longer. What use are jewel encrusted mountains . . . if there are no miners? What use are thrones and palaces . . . but no kings? Or slaves with no masters? Or indeed masters with no slaves? So – what is to be done? You there! (Zanzibar pointed to one of the company purely at random who in turn looked up in surprise from his goblet of foaming ale). What do children do for amusement in your homelands?"

Timarel, a swarthy, lard-laden Macedonian warlock, coughed, wiped his equally foaming mouth, thought for a moment, and then smiled.

"They wrestle, just like their fathers and elder brothers and uncles!"

"And what is the purpose?" asked Zanzibar.

Timarel thought a little more.

"Well, to win!" he answered jubilantly.

"Do the vanquished die?"

"Prince Zanzibar! They are but children! They are merely play-acting!"

"Exactly!" exclaimed a triumphant Zanzibar, who seemed to have chosen the right warrior to unwittingly aid him in his legerdemain.

Zanzibar looked around at the company of enemies, here to make a peace which he knew was never going to happen.

"And so, gentlemen – I—"

"Ahem!"

The cough came from the only female in the company, Joslar of Cleethorpes, a fiery sorceress.

"I do beg your pardon, my lady," continued Zanzibar, while Joslar grimly smiled. "And so, ladies and gentlemen, I—"

"Ahem!" coughed Joslar, again.

"What now, my lady?!" asked an impatient Zanzibar.

"Do you see any other lady sorcerers?" asked Joslar, with a sickly smile on her face.

Zanzibar held his fury and started again.

"LADY! And gentlemen – we cannot kill each other any longer, you all know that, but you know in your hearts that neither can we trust each other, nor ourselves, to keep to any bargains made tonight. You heard Tommy from Macclesfield, he—"

"Timarel of Macedonia! Be warned, Ju-Ju man! My patience is wearing thin."

"Unlike the rest of your mountainous girth, my fat friend," sneered Zanzibar.

"I will kill you for that!"

Timarel drew his dagger and lunged at Zanzibar, who simply became a crocodile and ate Timarel, whole, in front of the astounded company. Zanzibar had gambled on the chance to show his magical superiority – and had won.

Zanzibar burped.

No longer a reptile, Zanzibar continued:

" . . . One less fool – but more importantly, there is one less warrior for his kith and kin to call upon. . ."

Zanzibar deliberately paused. He looked around to see thoughts slowly forming and heads gently nodding to themselves and their neighbours.

"So, now do you see?" asked Zanzibar of the still museful gathering.

"Yes, my Prince Zanzibar, but surely you don't propose to let the fates of men and countries—"

"Ahem!"

" . . . of men, WOMEN – er – a woman – and countries, depend upon a wrestling tournament?" asked Ivan Kogorshin – a Cosslock (a Cossack warlock).

"Wrestling, no, a tournament of sorts, yes."

"You insult me! You insult us all!" yelled Joslar, eyes afire and ready to take on the might of Zanzibar, reptile or no.

"So! Kill me, eh?! Then what? Kill him?! And him?! And him?!" retorted Zanzibar, staring with eyes aflame at Joslar while randomly pointing at three others of the wizards assembled.

Although quick tempered, Joslar was not stupid. Like the rest of the gathering she began to realise that the African wizard, or Ju-Ju man, may indeed have something to offer.

Zanzibar withdrew his steely gaze from Joslar and continued.

"You all know where we acquired the arts of airborne warfare. From none other than King Arthur Pendragon of the Britons.

"I propose that we bow once again to the wisdom of Arthur the True, but for a far bigger purse than just the throne of England. We fight – yes – but we do not kill. However, the vanquished must yield and yield heavily: their lands, their treasures, their slaves, all must be given over to the conqueror, but the vanquished must be given the chance to regain what is lost. Challenge, my friends, challenge and fight . . . and then challenge and fight again! And again!"

"Your Highness! This is all very well, but what do we do to prevent death? We will still fight in the air, we will still fall, we will still die!" exclaimed Zemzilg.

"No!" shouted Zanzibar.

"*No?!* What do you mean – no?!" demanded Barant.

The company were soon to be taken in by Zanzibar's real intentions –

money and treasure and lots of it, but if the company agreed to his proposals, then Zanzibar's slyness mattered not.

"Have I not given you enough clues? King Arthur saved his realm with a game, or a sport. He ensured a great spectacle, a great battle in the sky, but those who fell did not die – they fell, yes indeed, but not die. I propose we use exactly the same methods, in principle, but on a far, far greater scale. Arthur's first attempt saw one-hundred and seventy-one knights in the sky. We'll have seventy-thousand, nay, eighty-thousand, ninety-thousand, even, and more! But how and where and when, you may ask? The how is easy, we use jousting poles and the fallen fall into a great mountain of mud – but they will not die. Where? Ah, where. . . ?

"Interesting problem, or may have been, gentlemen, and, ahem – lady. I have not been idle over the seasons. While you continued to send yourselves into oblivion, I have laboured to construct special arenas all over the world: in every mortal country and magic realm . . . in every bustling, heaving mass of humanity called cities . . . upon wild, windy moors . . . in the rare air of the highest mountains, and even by the rolling oceans. Wherever there is a challenge, there is an arena where the challenge may be met. When? I leave that up to you – but – it comes with a price – a price paid to me of which you all must meet: I demand two tithes of all the treasures and lands that the victor gains and the vanquished cedes. Do you agree to this – all of you – now and forever?"

"No!" protested Zemzilg, who thought that a crocodile would be no match for his superior fighting skills.

"What say you all?!" enquired Zanzibar, after burping. Again. "AYE!" came the reply from the remainder of the company.

As with the images of Arthur and Guinevere and the Round Table, the peace parley of Glastonbury faded into a mist, and soon Zanzibar and company were gone and the children found themselves back in the Main Hall.

Professor Winch, seated once more at the rear of the L shaped table surrounded by his staff – rose – and addressed the still amazed first years.

"And so, my young friends, you have witnessed for yourselves the history of Empires, its highs and lows – in every sense, but it was all but shadows of what has been. In just a few short days you will witness the pride and the passion and the sheer determination of every player from every team, first hand, when you experience your first game of Empires.

"Sadly, my friends, this evening's celebration is at an end, so I would like to ask you to please make your way back to your dormitories. I am equally sure that you have no intention of getting an early night, so you will find that refreshments have been provided in each of the common rooms.

"Goodnight, my young friends, I hope you have enjoyed your first day – and evening – at Hemlock Hall." Professor Winch's voice was gone.

Mike, along with his new friends and with the rest of the new Camelot House students, walked back up to the dormitory and along to the common

room where they managed to get a table to themselves. Abigail and Madeline went to fetch soft drinks and doughnuts for them all, but only after the three boys had mentioned how hungry they again were despite the earlier feast, but rather maddeningly (to the girls), did not seem to be willing to make the short trip to the buffet table.

"Here!" said Abigail on returning. "I'm not your mother!" pretending to slam the tray down on the table.

Pretend may have been the emotion, but she really did slam the tray down hard and cola shot out of one of the glasses and all over Mike. As he sat there stunned and with cola dripping down from his sodden mop of hair, the other three howled with laughter. Abigail went red and could not apologise enough, but she had no need.

Mike simply mopped his brow with a napkin, took a ring doughnut, slipped it onto Abigail's finger and said, "Will you marry me?"

"I'm sorry, I can't," immediately replied Abigail.

"Why not?" chuckled Mike.

"I'm promised to someone else!" replied Abigail. She lifted up her other hand and stuck out a finger, upon which she had very quickly slipped another doughnut which had fallen from the tray onto her lap.

In an instant all five were again cackling with raucous laughter, and for the next hour or so they chatted away freely and began to experience a deepening sense of belonging, not only to their new school but to each other.

Tom Carpenter suddenly appeared, standing at the end of the common room. He was rather strangely holding a jumbo guitar and looking at his watch rather obviously every few seconds.

Mike and his new friends all said their goodnights, and went off to get some sleep to be ready for their next challenge: the first day of lessons.

5

Accoutrements

MIKE AWOKE, but not particularly early. He was shaken from his waking whooziness by the muffled and not so muffled activities of those already up and about; the strange acoustics of the huge dormitory making the babble of voices seem like the echoey shrieking of excited children at the swimming baths.

Mike shot up out of bed, rifled through his papers which had been given out the previous day – and after much throwing and scrubbling found the one relevant to the first day of lessons:

'Plain black robes for all lessons
– all other accoutrements provided.
First lesson – Mathematics. Room Eleven; 9:00 a.m.
Teacher – Miss Prudence Fortune.'

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. He would not have had a clue as to what he was to take should he have had to supply his own accoutrements.

After a quick wash, Mike got dressed and dashed out of his castle. He couldn't rouse Leo or Dutch and so ran past a great many students who did not seem to be in any hurry whatsoever, and even seemed to be going the other way.

Mike ran down the staircase and across to the main hall, only to find it totally empty.

"Blinkin' 'eck! I'm late on my first day!"

"I think not," said a smiling Professor Creek, who had appeared at his side seemingly out of nowhere.

"Where is everyone, then?" asked Mike, with panic in his voice. "Er – sir," he hurriedly and respectfully added.

"Did you read any of your notes at all, young Miller?" asked the professor, but still smiling.

"Er – not all of them, Professor, I . . . er – forgot," added a foolish feeling Mike.

"In your common room, boy, the common room! If you hurry, you've just got time to beat Leo Thorpe to the last piece of toast!"

"Thanks, sir!" yelled Mike as he ran back up to the Camelot House common room.

"Where have you been? I was knocking for ages!" asked Leo, as a huffing, puffing Mike Miller sat down.

"I thought breakfast was in the hall," explained Mike, who did indeed arrive

back in the nick of time to grab the last piece of toast.

"So did quite a few people," chimed in Abigail, "but they didn't make it worse, by – er – sleeping in."

"All right, all right! I forgot to bring an alarm clock," retorted Mike.

"Now now, huffy," joked Dutch, "keep yer 'air on."

"Yeah – sorry. Now do any of you know what—"

But before Mike could finish the others smiled and all said together: 'ACCOUTREMENTS!'

"Leo and Dutch have already asked that, but we knew, didn't we, Abigail?" said Madeline.

"Well, sort of," replied Abigail. "I knew that they were originally the bits and pieces which went with a French soldier's uniform, buckles and belts and things, but I think nowadays it just means anything needed to do a particular job."

"Yes, my dad's the same, he calls all of our picnic stuff accoutrements whenever we're going for a day out in the car," added Madeline.

"That's all very – er – interesting, but I was going to ask does anyone know what our maths teacher is like?" said Mike.

"Oh," said Abigail and Madeline at the same time, and on this occasion Madeline's face was just as red as Abigail's frequently was.

Mike looked around and smiled.

"Nah, you were right, I thought it meant a book of French magic spells or something."

As the Magnificent Five indulged in juvenile banter which rapidly increased in silliness and noise levels, they were soon to find out that there is the right time for loud, raucous laughter, even from young ladies, but there is also the wrong time. For most civilised people, breakfast time is very definitely in the latter category.

"Pipe down, you lot! I've still got earache from last night!" said a stern Tom Carpenter, but he saw Abigail's red face drop and tremble a little, so immediately sat down at the table. "Take no notice, folks, I'm just tired after last night. So, you lot OK?"

"Yes, thanks," came the unanimous and formal reply.

"Come on now, I told you yesterday, I'm a prefect not a teacher. Are you OK?"

A far more relaxed, babbled but happily positive reply issued forth. Tom smiled at Abigail. He took his responsibilities, including never to belittle young students or leave them feeling vulnerable, very seriously indeed. Tom asked if he could help the friends in any way, but none of the five could think of anything in particular.

"Work to do, see you later," said Tom, rushing off down the dormitory.

"I think we'll have to go, too," said Madeline, "it's five to nine."

Along with the rest of their house, the five made their way through the throngs, down the staircase, and found room eleven on the third floor.

"Come in, children! Our first day together! I'm sure we'll all get on like a

house on fire."

Miss Prudence Fortune, the mathematics teacher, was a large, plump woman with a huge beehive of a blonde hairdo, no doubt dyed or even bleached – and wore lipstick that seemed to have been applied by an abstract artist. She had the air of a fallen film star who had not yet been told that she had been fired by the film company forty years previously. She wore a sparkly sequined dress and high heels which she clattered around in, and frequently had to hold on to desks and walls to avoid falling over.

Despite her appearance she was a brilliant mathematics teacher – or really lecturer to show due respect. Prudence Fortune had been poached by Professor Winch from Oxford University: she was not even a witch.

"Now, children – your experience of mathematics here will be very different to what you have all experienced – or would experience elsewhere: I like to apply the problems to a physical reality of which you will all take an active part in . . . ah, Professor Creek – thank you, my friend."

Professor Ezekiel Creek joined the class, and the children were soon to find out why.

"As I don't believe in dilly dallying," continued Miss Fortune, "I have asked the good professor to help me out a little. It may come as a surprise to you to find that I am not a witch, and on occasions I need the help of some of the other staff, excessive pride I leave to others – here, help is the keyword, whatever the help in question transpires to be. So, children – up, up, up and away – to the Arena!"

The confused students who had only just sat down, just as quickly stood up and followed Miss Fortune and Professor Creek out of the main building and over to the Arena.

The children were astounded to find that floating above the centre of the pitch was a three dimensional display of algebraic formulas, but currently devoid of any digits. The display consisted of two separate equations which then had to be resolved into one final answer.

Although departing from strict algebraic formatting, for the purpose of both vision and clarity, the different parts of the puzzle were layered one on top of the other and were just seemingly hanging in the air.

Each equation consisted of a bracket; within each of these were question marks left and right, indicating where the currently missing digits should go, and an X – the multiplication symbol, in between. To the right of the brackets were another X, a question mark and an equals sign and another question mark.

In between and right underneath the two penultimate question marks was a large plus sign, and the final layer to this huge four-tier puzzle and seemingly resting on the pitch, were the symbols for the purpose of providing the final answer – an equals sign and a final question mark.

"Your name, young man?" asked Miss Fortune of Leo.

"Leo Thorpe, Miss."

"Rightyo, Leo, please walk over to the bracket and stand on the outside

left. For our purposes you are now the figure three."

To the amazement of his friends as well as the rest of the class, Leo's body first began to rise so as to reach the top equation, and then it began to contort. After he had been rearranged to look like the number three, Leo was magically manoeuvred into place on the left side of the bracket.

Next was the yet again blushing Abigail. She too rose up into the air and was soon stood on the inside right side of the bracket after becoming a figure four.

Then came the biggest and unfortunately fattest boy in the new Camelot intake – Tobias Jordache. He stood to the right of the multiplication sign to the right of the bracket, displacing the first question mark. Tobias became another three.

On the next layer down and to the left of the second bracket, was the tallest girl in Camelot, Hyacinth Molyneaux. After her name had been called, Hyacinth had been magically contorted to become another figure three.

Opposite Hyacinth was another girl from the class, Sarah Dibbles. She had become a figure four.

Mike Miller completed the comic process. Just like Tobias had done, he displaced the first question mark to the right of the bracket. Mike, like Sarah, was now also a figure four.

"Excellent, children! I have no doubt that you know the answer to this equation, but why do you know it? The sad truth for most of you is – you know it because you have been told the answer. In my class that is not good enough: you will live and breathe the answer. You will not only know the answer, but you will understand how and why you arrived at it. . .

"You there – in the equation! Can you hear me?!" suddenly shouted Miss Fortune, to which the answer was a resounding yes. "Good! It is time, my friends, for a cocktail party!"

If the class were staggered by what had happened so far, this was nothing to what they all witnessed next: at one end of the Arena suddenly appeared a stage, set up for a play centring on a cocktail party in the drawing room of a large country house. The children's gaze and concentration on this strange site was broken by Miss Fortune yet again shouting over to the algebraic equation.

"Please listen for your name – and shout out your number. Mr Thorpe, if you would, please!"

"Three!" replied Leo.

Distracted by sounds now emanating from the far end of the Arena, the class once again looked from the equation to the stage. There, enjoying a damn good cocktail party with music, smoked salmon, caviar, and of course cocktails and champagne, were three Leo Thorpes.

Leo the First wore a white dinner jacket, a black tie and a monocle. He stood there with his face screwed up, guffawing away, while another Leo Thorpe, dressed up as a Victorian colonial colonel back from a hunting expedition with the requisite plus-fours and a pith helmet, explained all

about the lion which had eaten his mistress. This apparently had saved him the rather awkward task of explaining her presence to his wife. Leo the First screwed up his face even further and continued to laugh much as a pig grunts. Meanwhile, Leo the Third was busy comparing the seven different varieties of caviar on offer.

"Abigail!"

"Four!"

Four Abigails were a string quartet providing live music for the party.

"Tobias!"

"Three!"

Three Tobias's played poker in the corner of the room.

"Hyacinth!"

"Th-th-three!" screeched Hyacinth, as she was very nervous. Her thespianic alter egos were three elderly maiden aunt versions of herself, sitting there, heavily cardiganed – looking through pince-nez and tutting at the three Leo Thorpes.

"Sarah and Michael!"

"FFoouurr!" said Sarah and Mike, almost in unison, but with Mike a nano second behind due to not being called Michael very often. The four Sarahs and Michaels were bright young things doing an energetic and rather jolly Charleston dance in the middle of the room.

Miss Fortune went back over the names again but not in the same order.

"Abigail!"

Immediately the four Abigails became drum majorettes. (Dutch and Madeline smiled at this perfect choice, and Dutch began to quietly hum 'Abigail, Abigail Abigail'). They left the stage and then each marked time until they were all level width ways, and then began to march across the pitch, twirling their batons.

"Leo!"

The three Leos, now rank and file baton twirlers but dressed as drum majors for the occasion, left the stage and were soon marching behind all of the Abigails.

"Tobias!"

This is where things began to get even more interesting, if that was possible.

The trio of Tobiases, now in soldiers' uniforms, quickly fell into step behind the Abigails and the Leos, and the parade of sorts continued to march up the length of the pitch.

Although the parade did not seem to notice it at all, the spectators were astonished to see a pleasantly shaded blue mist floating just above the ground in the centre of the pitch.

Without showing any degree of awareness or the least look of surprise, the marchers marched on, disappearing right into the mist.

Row by row, the band gradually re-emerged on the other side.

All ten doppelgangers were now adorned in the colourful apparel of a

festival marching band.

After adopting a stern face, one of the Abigails had edged to the front of her fellow magic clones and was bearing a small drum strapped to her shoulders. She led this part of the parade while holding drumsticks as if poised to commence playing. The other nine mathematical musicians were equally ready to strike up a lively classic, with each bearing either a saxophone, a trombone or a cornet. There were three of each instrument.

An identical routine from Mike and the others followed. Dutch, along with Madeline and the rest of the class watching from the sidelines, had seen Abigail, or at least her magic clone, and this had brought to mind Abigail's tale of when she first knew she was a witch, which of course also meant Dutch (still) could not get the tune *'Stars and Stripes Forever'* out of his head. Then came a shout from the far side of the stadium from an unseen and perhaps even invisible band leader. The leading Abigail's face became even grimmer as she raised her drum sticks even higher. . .

"Go on! GO ON!" meant to think Dutch, but could not help but shout it out loud. This was to laughs from his class-mates and quizzical looks from the two teachers.

Dutch was to be disappointed, sadly, but this was only momentary as it was still highly enjoyable. As a long-forgotten Souza march came to an end, the grim-faced scratch band went immediately into, *'Oh When the Saints go Marching In'*.

What had started off as something which had seemed hilarious at first to Dutch and the other spectators, now became a great musical extravaganza.

With grim faces duly dispelled, the rendition of the old classic was being given the Dixieland treatment, complete with the uppy downy juddery dance moves reminiscent of a New Orleans jazz band on the march. This was made even more stylish by the band forming into two long lines; one veered left to allow a smooth march past the solid equation, while the other veered right, with both reforming once beyond it.

The wacky jazz parade played, danced and strutted on, heading yet again towards the strange bluey mist which now shrouded the opposite end of the stadium.

As the band moved into the mysterious but not unpleasant cloud, they were shielded from the spectators' view and the music began to fade, but only for a second.

No sooner had the last of the band disappeared into the mist than a new formation emerged from it. They were now split into two sections, and out in front of each was a solitary Mike and a lone Tobias, each dressed as drum majors and holding batons.

Behind these were three more Mikes and two more Tobiases, with each couple or trio stood abreast and also holding batons. Behind the Mikes were a total of twelve Hyacinths and Sarahs, split into four sections of three. Leading these were three Hyacinths – all drum majorettes and bearing batons; following were three Sarahs: one playing a piccolo, another a fife

and the third a jazz flute. Then came three accordion playing Hyacinths, with three drum-playing Sarahs bringing up the rear.

The band marched along, and as before were grim-faced and awaiting the signal to strike up.

"Hmmm . . . maybe this time. . ." thought Dutch, as he as well as the rest of the children watching from the perimeter saw Tobias, Abigail and Leo make up a similar formation.

Dutch was again to be disappointed. The unexpected yell with precision timing from the two leading boys, resulted in both pipe bands striking up the theme from the old TV police show, *'Z Cars'*, in perfect unison.

Rather oddly, thought many of the watchers, the mist had again disappeared from one end but had instantly reappeared at the other.

The parade marched on.

The rest of the class had an inkling where this was going, despite some being amazed and yet a little embarrassed at seeing magical versions of themselves thoroughly enjoying the trappings of a cocktail party and now strutting right around the Arena. They quickly realised that each increase in the numbers of each child corresponded with the different parts of the equation.

The drill movements were spot on, and the class looked on in stunned disbelief as the drum majors and majorettes and other baton twirlers, flung their batons in the air, caught them, and made the most complex twirling movements with their wrists, totally in time with the music and with their faces contorted in total concentration.

Adding a little combined style and comedy were the leading Mike and the leading Tobias. The pair having adopted exceptionally grim faces, yelled out loud, husky, raspy and of course to the non-combatant, unintelligible commands relating to either the marching or the music.

The gala parade was lauded with cheers and applause from both pupils and staff. What caused a great deal of manic laughter was a little trick played by a mischievous Professor Creek on the baton twirling Leo, or just one of them: this one had not been turned into a drum major, which is the male of the species, but a frilly-skirted, sparkly-sequinned drum majorette. His friends could not help but laugh out loud at this comic site, and Dutch collapsed in a heap and banged his fists down hard upon the ground, with his ribs badly aching.

Once more the parade disappeared into the mist, but out came – two sections separated by a couple of feet or so, of forty-eight Mikes and thirty-six Tobiases, all rigged out as soldiers from the First World War.

The pipe bands had made way for a more military style brass band. Upon getting yet another very angry throaty yell from the front, the two sections struck up the theme from TV's *'Black Adder'*.

The living, breathing, algebraic equation had just revealed its two penultimate solutions. The remainder of the spectacle was about to reveal the final answer in stunning fashion.

The cocktail party and the mists had gone for good, and only the final equals sign and the question mark remained from the algebraic symbols; but not for much longer. These disappeared at the same time as a mini grandstand appeared at the opposite end of the Arena.

The awestruck first years alternated their gaze between the continuing gala parade and the grandstand, wondering what was going to happen next.

The combined parade of eighty-four Tobiases and Mikes marched right up the stairs of the grandstand in single file, and positioned themselves strategically in different rows and across its width.

The music stopped, the whole Arena went black – and huge explosions emanated from the grandstand.

With the children who had been part of the initial equation (and who thought only seconds had passed since answering to their respective numbers), now back with the rest of the class, they all looked on enthralled as the combined magi-algebraic Mikes and Tobiases, with a succession of booms, flashes and bangs, were launched into the sky like human rockets. With a bang of seismic proportions, each pyrotechnic doppelganger shattered into a million, brightly shining multi-coloured pieces, which then froze high in the sky, shone even brighter, and with a final very loud bang, disappeared.

The class were speechless; but it still wasn't over – but by this time Miss Fortune was frowning while Professor Creek just smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Although most of the spells used in Miss Fortune's lessons were something called Repeatable Auto-spells, which non-magic folk can use if licensed to do so, the supposed finale that everyone had just witnessed was Professor Creek's own little piéce d'resistance. But it wasn't the finale at all; still there was more. . .

The grandstand disappeared and the pitch was converted into a pinball machine.

Ready to be launched right around the Arena was a giant pinball, but this looked more like a huge billiard ball as it had red and white stripes and the figure eighty-four in red figures in a white circle.

The giant lever at the side of the pitch was drawn right back and then released by an unseen magic force. The lever gave the pinball a tremendous thwack and the pinball shot off at great speed. The pinball boinged, zoinged, thwoinged, pinged, dinged, danged, donged, banged, zinged, zanged, zonged, thwanged – and ricocheted right around the giant pinball machine. It did this several times to an accompaniment of flashing lights, rings and dings – and with a huge bang (again!), it disappeared into the tunnel at the end of the Arena, and the scoreboard flashed up the multi-coloured figure eighty-four.

More cheering and applause followed, and Miss Fortune once again addressed the entire class.

"Well, children, that didn't hurt, did it?! I know you probably realised early on that there was more trickery and razamataz than complex mathematics in

our little display, but it was just to give you a taster of what we will do over the next year. However, rest assured that next time it will be a lot harder, although hopefully just as enjoyable. Right then, off you pop to your next lesson!"

No-one had time to discuss what they had just witnessed – as Professor Creek's Mathemagickery – as he likes to call it – had made them late for their next lesson.

The whole class returned to the main building and climbed back up the staircase to Room Seven on the second floor, which was for history with Professor Bookbinder.

Alfred Bookbinder, a thin, stooped old man with a wiry mass, or mess of grey hair, was the oldest teacher at the school. He often joked and was just as frequently teased by the rest of the staff, that he was only such a good history teacher because he had been there when it had happened.

The old master beckoned the children to sit down. Just like Miss Fortune in the previous lesson, he had no intention of droning on or reading from a book, or anything like it.

No sooner had the class sat down than Professor Bookbinder stood up and told the children they were going on a walk. The professor went over to the store cupboard and opened the door. There, instead of books upon shelves and boxes on the floor, was an old stone staircase. After asking the children to follow, he walked through the door to commence the slow clomp down the steps.

Despite a large number of people all tramping down a stone staircase all at the same time, the sound of the resulting footfall was no more than a dull thud, rather than the cacophonous near-deafening echoey clatter one would expect from so many feet on stone.

Within minutes the children had all become bystanders at many famous events in history. However, the elderly Professor Bookbinder was careful to spare the young people the gory details of many of the more infamous and gruesome historical milestones.

With a warm farewell, he, like Miss Fortune had done, told them that their next lesson would be a lot harder. This was to be the pattern throughout the day. Each lesson was really an introduction and an easy one at that, to the type of things they would be doing over the coming academic year.

The next lesson was geography. This consisted of a train ride while sitting on the roof of a packed train in the middle of India, quickly followed by an explanation of the dangers of sandstone depletion through mining in the English Lake District, which was of course, also on location – and as usual – it was raining. Afterwards they even had time to sit and talk with their teacher, Mrs Willow, a small but tough looking woman with a skinhead haircut, about their home towns.

Next was lunch which was in the Main Hall. This time there were no waiters or waitresses, they queued up much the same as pupils do at any school around the world, but they all had to agree that the food was superb. Leo

had particular reason to agree to this as it would have seemed highly illogical not to have done so, considering how many slices of roast beef and boiled potatoes he managed to consume.

It was time for cauldron and wand skills with Miss Daphne Llefevre, a tall, pale-faced lady, dressed entirely in black and with a very strange manner indeed, but her lesson was nonetheless enjoyable. What amused the children was that her accent didn't fit with her appearance or general demeanour.

"Nah listen up, kids, 'n' listen good. This 'ere's the only lesson which 'll ge' ya anywheres in the magic world – so knuckle dahn and study. Any larkin' abaht, yer out – no exceptions. Yer can 'elp ole 'Arry Gripweed clean the winders fer all I care – so fink on . . . yeeer."

However, her Cockney bark was far worse than her bite. She got them all to add a particularly vile mix of ingredients to the cauldrons, boil them up, utter the appropriate incantations, wave their wands, and out came – dandelion and burdock. It was only after the ever adventurous Leo had had a quick slurp from his ladle that the others followed suit.

The rest of the lesson was taken up with some comic bantering between Miss Llefevre and Dutch over the merits and demerits of their respective London neighbourhoods. This became rather confusing, at least to most of the class, as Miss Llefevre seemed to think it was a positive rather than a negative thing that her own manor, Whitechapel, had far more cockroach infestations than Dutch's very own East Ham.

"Useful fings, cockies, yer can do all sorts wiv 'em . . . yeeeer."

The children couldn't help but snigger at the creepy, low pitch, laughy 'Yeeer', at the end of many of her sentences, but Miss Llefevre didn't seem to notice.

The final lesson before tea was combined sciences. This was taught by Professor Edwin Cornstone, a short, balding but stocky man. The lesson was held in the allotments. The children soon realised that this was going to be one exception to the easy day they had enjoyed so far.

"Trowels out! Now, unlike many of my colleagues I do not believe in wasting your parents' hard earned money on lar de dar drivel just to ease you in, you will work in my lesson and you will start now. Many years ago the powers that be decided that school years should begin in September. From a botanical, agricultural and magic point of view – this is poppycock! But – until the Magic Council elects someone who knows what they're doing, we have to start at harvest time – fat lot of use that is! But try – we will.

"Although a Master of Combined Sciences, here in this school I give priority to the natural world. This primarily means that I will teach you how to grow all manner of vegetation, extract seeds, and make use of all by-products of the florae and faunae of both worlds and make them suitable for use in our own far superior community. I am also supposed to teach you ordinary science, but the day you see me in a blasted laboratory with a bunsen burner, then shoot me.

"OK, take your trowels and remove the carrots and place them in the

baskets, then move over to the other side of the allotment and pull up the onions."

After an hour the exhausted students rubbed their backs and were glad to hear the dragon-roar heralding the end of the lesson.

"Er – excuse me, sir, will we be working on sap extraction for use in magic next time? I seem to remember my granny had a spell involving the juice from vegetables," asked a rather creepy young boy called Adam Volynchook.

"No! They're for my dinner. Now – sod off, the lot of you."

Mike was only too glad to stop for the day, or so he thought.

After an equally enjoyable dinner they were once again back in the common room.

"What do you mean, night lessons?!" asked an astounded Mike, after Madeline had mentioned that they needed to be in Room Five at 7:00 p.m. for their double government and citizenship lesson.

"You never read your notes, did you?" half-asked Madeline.

"No. But I didn't think we'd have to go to night-school though, and in our first week!" replied a disgruntled Mike.

"If you had have read your notes, you would know that it's *ONLY* the first week. Apparently it is to get all of us quickly settled into school life," added Abigail.

"More like absolutely exhausted so we'll be like zombies!" retorted Mike.

"Yeah, I'm surprised as well," said Dutch, "still, it's OK here, ain' it?"

"Yeah, it is, you're right," conceded Mike.

As the ever-hungry children snacked on crisps and slurped on cola, Mike became unusually quiet. The others noticed this but didn't dwell on the matter.

A few moments later, Mike stood, sighed and muttered something which his friends thought may have been, "See you later." He trudged back to his room and flopped down on his bed so as to have a quick nap.

No sooner had his head hit the pillow than there was a huge knock on his door. Mike groaned, got up again and went and opened up. Standing there looking rather concerned were Leo and Dutch.

"Er – we didn't want to mention this earlier, but are you OK?" asked Leo.

Mike was about to say he was perfectly all right, but something made him tell the truth.

"No, not really. I don't know why, but I think that that Professor Cornstone has got it in for me."

"That's ridiculous! You've only just met him today, why would he have anything against you?" replied a dismissive Leo.

"It was the way he was looking at me, it was as if he hated me. I know it seems daft, but if you could only have seen him, you'd know," replied Mike.

"Er – I did," said Dutch. "I thought he was the same with everyone at first – which he was really – but then I realised he was even worse towards you. I wasn't sure whether he'd really got to you, though – not until now."

"Am I glad to hear that. I know I'm not just going mad now," said a

relieved Mike.

"Just be careful. He looks a real troublemaker, the type who'll get someone else the blame," said the unusually wise Dutch.

"Me, most probably. . ." replied Mike, while shrugging his shoulders.

"Er – anyway, we'll see you later. Bye," said Leo.

Dutch just waved and off they went, but only to the end of Leo's castle next door where Madeline and Abigail were waiting. They traded whispers and then all went back to their respective palatial abodes. Mike saw this and smiled, he knew he had made some really good friends.

Government and citizenship was a surprise to the whole class. Although the subject's usual teacher was present, none other than Professor Creek, he was not giving the lesson. A chubby, balding, red-faced man in fine braidery and a tri-corner hat, stood there and introduced himself.

"Hello, children, I am Mr Horatio Mainbrace. I am the Lord Mayor of the Magic Council for the Magical British Isles. That supposedly makes me totally in charge of our community, but I assure you all – the reality is rather different. . ."

The Lord Mayor went on to explain how the magic community was governed, some of its history – and of what and of whom the rest of the Magic Council was made up of. It could have been a real sleep-inducing presentation, but the children were surprised to find that it was quite interesting, and as it was an inter-active affair were able to talk with magic holograms of famous historical figures.

The biggest surprise came when they found that some of these had also been members of the magic community. This included King Canute, who was also a wizard but not a very good one, and the Princes in the Tower – these were two promising young wizards who had not been murdered as history tells us, but had been magically transported to safety and to a new life as trapeze artists in a Florentine circus.

Although the lesson was more like history again, it didn't matter. And as Mr Mainbrace said as part of his summing up – "When studying how today was arrived at, even politically, then this indeed is history".

Professor Creek gave one of his diplomatic gestures for decorum to be observed and maintained, and the children rose from their seats as Mr Mainbrace took his leave of the class.

"Phew!" said Madeline, after sitting down back in the common room and kicking her shoes off. "I think you had a point there, Mike, I'm worn out."

"Yeah, I could sleep for a week," agreed Mike.

Leo took his notes out of his pocket to check the timetable for the next day. "Hey! Look at this!" he suddenly exclaimed. "We're off out tomorrow!"

They all looked over Leo's shoulder as he read out loud:

'Wednesday. 07:00. Front entrance. . .
Combined Subjects Field Trip.
Own clothing if desired.'

"Combined Subjects Field Trip?! What does that mean?" asked Dutch.

"Exactly what it says, I suppose," said Madeline, "we somehow do every subject while we're on a day out."

"Never mind that! Seven o'clock! They're flogging us to death here!"

"An early night then, I think," said Abigail, more to herself but still out loud.

"Yeah, I'm all in," agreed Mike, as did the others.

A very tired group of friends again called it a night, and went off for some much needed sleep. They were soon joined by most of the other first years, once word had got round about the early start.

As Mike went to settle down for the night, he saw a little package on the bedside table. The post mark and the writing made it obvious who it was from. He ripped it open. Inside was a small alarm clock and wrapped around this was a note:

'Dear Mike,
Hope you have settled in OK and are happy.
Your dad and I are still getting used to the quiet
and not having to clean your dirty football boots.
Anyway, we just thought you might need this.
Write soon.
Love. Mum (and Dad).'

Mike smiled, put the note in the table drawer and set the alarm clock for 6:00 a.m. He felt as if he had only just closed his eyes when the alarm went off.

6

A Whirlwind Tour

A VERY LARGE NUMBER of students in heavy outdoor clothing were gathered outside of the main entrance. It was early morning and it was lashing down rain.

As they all pulled their hoods up and bent their heads down to try and keep both dry and warm, it dawned on Mike and many of the others that the enchanted Lesterjestershire had not been enchanted enough.

At precisely 7:00a.m., Professor Winch and the entire teaching and support staff appeared from around the side of the school. This was at the same time as a huge booming and whooshing sound came from the east. Some of the children were about to scream and run in panic as they saw a number of silvery-grey whirlwinds come spiralling towards the school, but they were hastily reassured by the headmaster.

"Listen, everyone, there is no need to worry!" shouted Professor Winch over the tremendous noise. "As strange as it may seem, this is our transport for the field trip. Now – please arrange yourselves into groups of five and be ready to climb aboard as each whirlwind stops."

As with their first evening at Hemlock Hall, the five breathed sighs of relief that they would not be broken up, as well as being a little selfish that there would be no need for them to share with another student.

The first whirlwind stopped. The children quickly realised that this was far bigger than the others behind it, but there was a very good reason for this – it needed to be. For such long-distance trips Professor Winch liked to keep all of his staff together.

The whirlwind began to change shape – a little, with the grey-white mist separating in the middle, creating an opening.

After a minute or so the mist which had been dispersed, reintensified and reshaped itself to form a ghostly stairway into the heart of the whirlwind.

Mike looked across – and his jaw dropped: inside the whirlwind he could see a bar stacked with bottles and glasses, and a barman wiping several champagne flutes with a towel. To the left were a number of plush dining tables and chairs, with a number of people quickly setting each table for a meal.

"Mike . . . Mike! Here's ours," said Dutch.

"Hmmm – eh? Oh, sorry, wouldn't mind going in the staff – er – whirlwind," said an envious Mike Miller.

"Nah, we'll have more fun on our own!" insisted Dutch. They all climbed aboard the sixth whirlwind in the line. Inside was not what they envisaged it would be at all.

The children were amazed to find themselves walking on a highly polished, wooden marquetry floor. There was a big oak table in the middle, around which were five, huge, adjustable Pullman seats on casters. On the table were pads of paper and pens. The surrounding walls were made of oak panelling, and against the wall to the left was a bookcase crammed with all kinds of books. On the right side was a hot and cold drinks machine, and next to this was another vending machine which dispensed every hot meal and cold snack imaginable. To both the front and on the far left were openings in the oak panels, which gave them all a clear view of what was happening outside.

It was also warm. Where the source of this welcome heat was they did not know, but they all took their coats off and settled down – but not for long.

As ever with eleven year olds (and many adults), finding themselves in the vicinity of a variety of adjustable or swivel chairs on casters, all seriousness goes out of the window. The five adjusted, readjusted and swivelled their chairs, and moved around their bizarre accommodation at high-speed.

The voice of Professor Winch brought them back to the reasons as to why they were inside a whirlwind in the first place. His bodiless voice echoed right around all of the whirlwinds:

"Please, please, my young friends, if you would all pause a moment from your swivel chair olympics . . . before we set off I would like to explain at least a little of what we are doing today, although to explain it all would spoil many surprises. Basically – we are on an around the world trip, during which there will be various stops and some events and activities which I hope you will enjoy tremendously.

"Despite travelling at great speed, we will still be some time before we make our first port of call. So – please remain seated – use the safety belts provided – and we'll be off shortly. Thank you."

No sooner had the children repositioned their chairs around the table and buckled up, than they were off. Although there was an initial whooshing noise and a jolt, they were very soon flying across the Atlantic Ocean, but only the blurred visions of clouds above and the vast ocean below let them know they were moving at all.

After ten minutes or so, Professor Winch once again spoke. This time it was to tell them lessons had begun and their endeavours would commence gaining points for their houses.

First was a quiz, but rather a complex one.

The professor read out a series of cryptic clues and told them the answer would be found in the veritable tomes upon the bookshelf. Initially they were to write their answers down on the seemingly perfectly ordinary pen and paper. This, however, would be no problem to Professor Winch. Despite being thirty yards and several whirlwinds away, somehow he would be able to read every word. However, for the sake of generating bubble and excitement, the teams could if they wished also shout the answer out, and this would be heard by all of the staff and pupils on each whirlwind.

There was a frantic scrambling on each and every whirlwind. The first answer was relatively easy – 'Merlin'. The clues had still been a little vague, though, with such references to golden coloured apples floating upon a lake. The more knowledgeable, such as Madeline, smugly remained seated and wrote their answer down.

As the quiz became harder and harder, each group of five began to at last work in tandem, pouring through reference books, atlases, dictionaries, biographies, everything. No-one team or house did particularly well, but – and mainly due to Mike and his friends' brainstorming and loudly at that – Camelot were in the lead by one point.

It was time for the last question – fifty points were up for grabs. The trouble was, only seven points separated Camelot in first place and Solstice in fourth. Any team could win the quiz for their house – if they were the first with the right answer. Tension could be felt throughout the cavalcade of whirlwinds . . . the children were on the edge of their seats, awaiting the question.

"Finally, my young friends, a rhyme – more accurately, a puzzle to be answered . . . but beware – it will not just be a simple answer – I will need an explanation of how you arrived at it. (Miss Fortune gurgled into her lipstick sodden sherry glass upon hearing this). Ready? Good!"

'A seasonable start but with O not U,
Then next is wet, but dried in cold.
An apple or two so squashed is strong –
but famed in song.
The house which wins the points of bounty,
Will know the answer is this county'.

Straightaway, the children manically fired off all sorts of nonsensical rubbish at each other, as did every other team.

"Saltshire!" shouted Dutch, his brain stuck on the cryptic seasonable.

"Don't be soft! There's no such place!" shrieked Madeline.

"Well, where, then – clever clogs?!" retorted Dutch.

"Appledore!" interjected Mike, to which the word 'county!' was fired at him from four fire breathing dragons. "Oh yeah, sorry," said Mike.

"Look," interrupted Madeline, "let's think methodically – it's worked so far. We know it will probably end in shire, so let's see if we can think of every county from A-Z, and when we reach the right one it might ring a bell. . ."

"There's too many!" yelled Leo. "One of the other teams will have got it by then!"

"OK, smarty pants, you think of something better!" humphed Abigail, coming to her friend's rescue with her arms folded and her face yet again bright red, but this time in anger.

"'Ang on, 'ang on!" jumped in Dutch. "It's only a quiz, let's calm down and think. What's this seasonable thing mean? Is it to do with salt and pepper, or

what?"

"NO!" came the four-fold reply.

"Seasons!" suddenly shrieked Abigail. "You know – winter, spring, sum—"

"Summer!" interrupted Mike, and very loudly with it.

"Somerset!" yelled Madeline, even louder.

"It can't be!" protested the over logical Mike. "It's not spelt the same."

"Oh," came a three-fold reply.

"It doesn't have to be! – it's cryptic! My dad does cryptic crosswords. That's what a cryptic clue is all about! It must be Somerset!" insisted Abigail.

"Look! We've got to explain our answer! We may be right, but what about the rest?" said a panicky Leo.

"What's wet but dried in cold?" asked Madeline.

"Jelly," said Mike, quietly and calmly. He had eaten so much of it, even watched his mother melt the block, stir it, and put it in the fridge, that even a cryptic reference to it was not going to get past him.

"Somerjelly? Where's that?" asked a disbelieving and momentarily stupid Leo.

"No no no! Jelly is another clue, it's wet, then it's cold, and then dry in the fridge," came Mike's rebuke.

"It sets in the fridge! Somerset! Yeeees!" shouted a jubilant Madeline, and punched the air.

"We've already got that! We're wasting time! But what about this apple business – mushed up and strong all about?" asked a confused Dutch.

"Apple juice. . ." said Abigail.

"No. Cider. . ." suggested Mike.

"Or scrumpy!" yelled Leo and Madeline.

"Somerjellyscrumpyciderapple?! I don't think so!" scoffed Dutch.

"Famed in song, you idiot!" yelled Mike. "It's mostly Devon and Cornwall they yodel on about, but my Uncle Charlie says they've got it wrong because most of the stuff is really from Somerset. And my mum always plays those old folk songs, or you see them on the telly dressed in yokels outfits and straw in their mouths, goin' on about havin' scrumpy for breakfast or something. . . "

"I don't think they sang that!" shouted Abigail.

"It doesn't matter! The apple business swings it! Just get that written down – Somerset – and spell it right or we mightn't win!" spluttered the over-excited Mike.

Abigail quickly scribbled down Somerset, she also went to shout it out loud, felt silly, so didn't. Mike smiled at her and did the honours instead. And then they waited. . .

Professor Winch's bodiless voice boomed out all over the whirlwinds.

"We have a tie-breaker, folks! It's between one of the Camelot teams and one from Solstice, but let's see if we can sort out the men from the boys ('Ahem!') – er – and the ladies from . . . to – hic!-'eck with it – you know what I mean! Solstice, whirlwind four I believe, let's have your explanation

please. . . ?"

The rather arrogant Bruce D'Acort of Solstice coughed, and spoke for his team.

"Firstly, although we feel there were omissions in the clues to adequately explain the different spellings of Somer with an O and summer with a U, we nevertheless came to the conclusion that it was indeed Somer and it was indeed with an O. We also agreed that the wet and cold business was a poetic way of saying winter's here and that the summer has gone, and so—"

"Sorry! Wrong!" interrupted Professor Winch.

To audible groans from Bruce and his Solstice team, Mike and co. were asked how they had arrived at Somerset. Dutch rather unwisely jumped in to explain, and although he very luckily never said anything to disqualify them he still made an absolute mess of things. With an apology (and a pulled face from Dutch), Madeline calmly gave their version of the whys and wherefores.

"Well done! Camelot House win by forty-nine points! And as an extra bonus, the winning whirlwind – number six, I believe – has won a seven course meal at Patty's Patisserie!" proclaimed Professor Winch.

The five were jubilant. They yelled, shouted, did high fives, and Mike led them all in a rousing version of, *'I am a cider drinker!'* Only a few loud coughs from their headmaster saw order duly restored.

"Hard luck, Solstice, but again, well done whirligig six and Camelot! But can you do it again? I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that there will be another quiz on the return journey. However, for now, relax, have a meal and then perhaps rest, as we have a busy day ahead of us all. Thank you."

"Whirligig six?" mockingly muttered most of the whole year, well, mostly Bruce and his none-too happy classmates.

The five friends took their headmaster's advice and had a variety of snacks, a few soft drinks, and then just sat quietly talking and reading – or four of them did. Leo, probably due to over-indulging in the wide variety of fast foods available, reclined in his Pullman chair – and drooled and snored heavily as he went into a deep sleep.

A little while later they felt their whirlwind slow down. As they all looked through the opening they saw that they were landing.

They waited for the announcement to do so from the headmaster, climbed down, and found themselves in a dense forest.

In the distance they could see mountains, but these had rather flat tops to them. All of the children looked around in confusion.

None of the staff had joined them yet, but after a minute or so the most unpleasant teacher they had all met so far, Professor Cornstone, climbed down and yelled at the first pupil he saw, which happened to be Adam Volynchook.

"Here, you! Take these and hand 'em out – one each! Right, you lot! Page one only! Study the questions – answer 'em – and be back as soon as you can! Don't forget, it's a team effort."

He passed a ton of text books to poor Adam, who would have collapsed if

all of the other students had not have had the sense to go to him rather than wait.

"Go on then! Get to it!"

Professor Cornstone reboarded the staff whirlwind and demanded a whisky from the overworked barman.

Mike and the others got their books and walked off to a clearing they could see a few feet away. This was so they could work on their task in peace.

"Not again! More rhymes!"

They all sat down on a log so as to peruse this latest cryptic offering. Mike read the verse out loud:

'First off is a plant for the Medicine Man;
Look at the picture as fast as you can.
When found you say how and make the man chant;
There's points in the bag which we'll never recant.
Davy and Jim are next to be found;
a hat and a knife you will take without sound.
Three goes you will get but then if you fail,
the drunken old Doc will take you to jail.
But if you are quick and have taken your chance,
it's off to the coast for a song and a dance.
But beware and take care, don't let it be folly;
so all to make sure that you each get a brolly!'

"What on earth is this all about!" cried Abigail. The rest just shrugged their shoulders.

"First off – as the verse says, let's look at the picture it mentions," suggested Mike.

At the bottom of the page was a solitary picture of a very strange flower. It had three rows of petals; these were mostly jet black in colour, but on the very top was a golden coloured bud.

"Come on, we must have to find this growing around here somewhere," said Madeline, but with panic in her voice. All of the other teams had already belted off further into the forest and were already out of sight.

They were just about to run off as well, when Dutch had an idea.

"'Ang on! It's a trick! 'Ow are we expected to know where to find that funny flower? I know they's ain't gonna make things too easy, but they won't make it that difficult either, otherwise we'd all be 'ere 'ours 'n 'ours. Let's look round 'ere first."

The others, resigned to not knowing what to do, simply agreed and had soon commenced their search.

"I've got it!" suddenly shouted Madeline. "I've found it! Over here!"

They all rushed over to Madeline. Each took a turn at examining her find, which, as it was teamwork, was also their find.

Madeline placed the cutting (which would be the proof of their find if later

asked for it), carefully in her coat pocket. She also remembered to be diplomatic.

"Great idea, Dutch! This should put us miles ahead!"

"Maybe not," said Mike, "listen. . ."

The five all strained their ears and heard whoop after whoop from different teams, some very near but others from quite a distance.

"There must be loads growing all over the place. Oh well, what's next?" asked Leo.

They all sat down on the log again and reread the verse. Dutch yet again came to the fore. As he was a big fan of cowboy films he found this very easy indeed.

"Come on, let's look for an Indian, or more accurately, a Medicine Man!"

Dutch led them all along a clearing in the forest, really hamming it up and expending great energy in making a trail for the others to follow. There was something that Dutch had not noticed but his smiling friends had; the only path there was had guide ropes either side and could only lead them one way anyway.

After a couple of minutes they came out into the open – a North American prairie to be precise. To their immediate right was a number of Native American tepees, roughly in a circle and with a campfire right in the middle. Sitting cross-legged around the fire were about twenty fierce looking Native Americans, or Indians as many still prefer to be known despite a world-wide movement oddly believing otherwise. They remained seated and scowled at the children.

Although their proud modern-day movement is usually against such characterisation, the magic tribes known to Professor Winch will occasionally oblige and take part in these fun-packed magic-filled dramatisations, but only if done in the right spirit. Even on the occasions when they are reluctant, they still usually come through for their good friend.

"Seeing as you've got us this far I think you should show them the flower," suggested an unusually timid Mike.

"Thanks, mate, but you've forgotten one thing. It's not any old Indian, it's got to be the Medicine Man," replied Dutch.

"Which one's he?" asked Abigail. Dutch just shrugged his shoulders.

"Hang on, I've an idea," said Mike. "On this part of the rhyme it doesn't give a limit to things, like how many goes and stuff. Why don't we just show the flower to each one in turn? When we get the right bloke, he'll – er – chant, or something. That's what it says here. . ."

Madeline had been thinking. He knew Mike was on the right track but time was of the essence. She cupped her hands and put them to her mouth.

"Excuse me! Which one of you is the Medicine Man?"

"He is!"came the instant reply, as nineteen Indians pointed to their smiling Shamen.

Dutch grabbed the flower, held it out to the Shamen – or Medicine Man – with one hand, and held his other hand up in the air and shouted "How!"

In an instant, twenty Indians led by the Shamen were dancing around the children, who soon found themselves cleverly herded around a totem pole.

The twenty braves made an ear-splitting racket with their whoops and chants, and rather threateningly waved their tomahawks to within an inch of the friends' faces. This went on for about two minutes.

Then came rifle fire and the sound of horses' hooves thundering across the prairie. The horses drew nearer and nearer; the Indians stopped their chanting – and ran off to mount their own steeds.

The friends then found themselves lifted clear off the ground and plonked onto their rescuers' horses. Such commands as, "Hold on, Mam!", were met with smiles by Abigail and Madeline, but a more uncouth, "Hang on to your britches, Shorty!", was less well received by Dutch – but it was only pretend as he was enjoying every minute – as were his friends.

The cowboys galloped away from the Indians, but they still turned round, leant past the Magnificent Five, and fired off round after round from their Colt 45s.

Soon the Indians were left far behind and the horses slowly came to a halt. They were all helped down safely and the riders rode off – but not before Dutch had caught sight of a well-trimmed blonde beard and a mane of long, flowing, yellow hair.

"Custer!" shouted Dutch. Whether it really was the tragic General George Armstrong Custer, Dutch was never to know.

They were all on the outskirts of a town, if it could be called that. What buildings there were, were heavily shot up from cannon fire with huge chunks of wall missing every few yards. Towards the front of the town was an equally shot up building and an equally dilapidated wall. It all looked vaguely familiar to the three boys.

It wasn't Dutch on this occasion who came up with the goods.

"I know where we are!" yelled Mike. "This is the town in my dad's favourite film! It's The Alamo!"

"And we've got to nick Davy Crockett's hat and Jim Bowie's knife!" yelled a jubilant Dutch, looking at his notes. For once – at least in Dutch's mind – they were doing his thing.

Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie were two tragic heroes, who for some reason are famed for somehow keeping thousands of Mexicans at bay with a beaver skin hat and a skinning knife at the Battle of the Alamo in 1836.

The Alamo was not the town itself but a mission station, situated on the edge of the beleaguered Mexican-flavoured Texan township of San Antonio.

"How do we find them to begin with?" asked Madeline.

"They'll be at the wall, waiting for the final attack by the Mexicans," said the knowledgeable Dutch.

"We'd best not rush things though. Let's stop a while and work out a plan," suggested Mike.

They found themselves by a bar, or more accurately a cantina, and as it was a hot sunny day, tables had been placed outside.

No sooner had they all sat down than a waitress – a young Mexican girl – a senorita, came out and put down a tray of cold lemonade and five small glasses.

As it was so hot all five of the friends gulped down their lemonade quickly. After quenching their thirsts they began to throw all sorts of crazy ideas at each other. One idea which seemed to be crazy at first gathered momentum – and after a few modifications here and there it was accepted by all.

Abigail and Madeline sneaked out of the town and across the flat land to where the Mexicans would attack from. They turned to each other, smiled, and then turned back towards the town and started yelling.

"Help! Help! Somebody help us, please! Help! Help!"

At the same time, the three boys sneaked up to the front of the wall and they too smiled as they saw Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie – strangely minus hat and knife – scramble through the gap in the wall and run across to where the shouts were coming from. This gave the boys the chance to try and claim their prize, and they inched nearer to where the hat and pen-knife lay on the floor.

As the boys quickly went to pick up the booty, they heard the tell-tale click of the hammer of a Colt 45 handgun. They turned around to find the self-same senorita from the cantina pointing the gun right at them.

The boys sighed and groaned as a hazy mist formed right around them. After the mist had cleared they found that they – and the girls – were again sitting at the tables outside the cantina. The same young lady brought out more lemonade – without a hint of her having thwarted her guests in their attempted burglary.

"That was a waste of time, wasn't it?" said Abigail.

"Yeah, but good fun, though!" chuckled Dutch.

The others duly agreed and set about planning their next move. Yet again a rather mad idea eventually got the go ahead: this time it was to outsmart the crafty senorita. They figured, or rather hoped that if they were ready for the senorita, or anybody else for that matter, then surely they would be allowed to pick up the booty.

The boys ran off towards the nearest thing to what San Antonio could offer as a town centre, which was basically a general store and a sign post. Not too long after, they were running back towards the girls with a stolen rope and an irate store owner shouting after them.

A short while later the two girls yet again screamed for help – and yet again the hat and the knife were left unprotected.

This time Dutch was the one with the task of grabbing the goodies, while Mike and Leo were to remain hidden behind some barrels until it was time to jump out and help their friend.

As Dutch neared their prize the senorita duly appeared. Bang on cue, Mike and Leo suddenly sprang up and leapt out from their hiding place. Leo had with him a lasso which he threw as best he could, while a tense Mike was poised to help tie up their prisoner.

But yet again the friends' valiant efforts were all to no avail.

The five were once again sitting outside the cantina and drinking more lemonade. They had failed again and they now only had one attempt left.

"I think I get it now. If the senorita appears, we've lost, fullstop, regardless of what we do. Something we're doing or even not doing is triggering a response. If we can work out what it is, then we should be able to pinch the hat and the knife," said Dutch, who really was excelling in this situation.

"I wonder what the rules are?" mused Mike.

"What do you mean?" replied Abigail.

"If we did something to prevent the senorita getting anywhere near to the wall, would another one appear anyway?"

"Do you know, you might have something there, Mike," said Madeline.

"I'm still thirsty," said Leo, as the effects of too big a lunch followed by a hot day in Texas began to take their toll.

"That's it!" said Mike. "We'll keep her busy! If some of us stay and actually go in and order lemonade, food, tequila, anything. Surely she can't be at the wall at the same time. What do you think?"

"It's our last go, some other senorita may still turn up, but we may as well go out with a bang even if we do fail. Yeah! Let's do it!" exclaimed Leo.

"OK, but not tequila," said Abigail.

"Spoilsport!" said Mike, but he was only joking as he didn't fancy the idea himself.

For the third and final time an attempt was made to relieve Messrs Crockett and Bowie of their, wait for it, accoutrements.

But Dutch mused on the situation. If they were successful on this occasion they would move onto the next stage, which was not likely to be anything remotely to do with cowboys. He sighed and came to a decision. . .

The five split up to try out their audacious plan.

Leo and Madeline felt that they had drawn the short straw as they considered staying behind to place a shipping order of tacos, tortillas, chili peppers, lemonade and perhaps even tequila – as being the boring bit, but they dutifully walked in and began to reel off their humungous inventory of dietary requirements. After a few moments the senorita seemed to be on edge and glancing out of the window, but she carried on putting together the order.

Meanwhile, a solitary Abigail was doing her wild-west version of Penelope Pitstop and was again shouting for all she was worth from No-Man's Land.

Yet again the two tragic heroes left their post, knifeless and hatless, while behind them hoping to stay unseen were Dutch and Mike, who stealthily approached their goal.

However, with the goodies tantalisingly in reach, Dutch suddenly put his hand to his mouth, squeezed his nose and held his head right back, but all was in vain as he then let out a huge sneeze.

Dutch turned to Mike and quietly apologised, but more importantly, the two tragic heroes stopped dead in their tracks, turned, gave lopsided smiles –

and pulled two Colt 45s from their hitherto unnoticed gun belts. They pointed their guns at Mike and Dutch – the plan had failed – again.

"'Ello, who's this?"

Dutch had spotted a tall, thin, gaunt looking man, walking, or rather staggering towards the two boys and their captors. He was accompanied by three familiar faces.

"I-It loo-loo-hic!ic-ic-hic!L-look-ook-ooks l-l-l-like I-I-I've g-g-gotf-f-f-f-f-f-fi-i-vemmmmMMORE! Ffff-hic!-or-hic!hic! th-the-hic! p-prissizzisson'nnnn," said the drunken doctor, or dentist to be precise.

Walking up to the wall was one John Henry 'Doc' Holliday. This was the famed, tuberculosis-ridden drunkard who had brandished more than a tooth extractor upon his travels. A little out of his usual time and territory perhaps, but on a trip like this, anything is possible.

The three familiar faces were of course, Leo, Madeline and Abigail. While the Doc kept his gun trained on these three; the senorita, with her Colt 45 once again unholstered, beckoned Mike and Dutch to join their friends.

The five were taken at gunpoint to the town jail and thrown in a cell. Luckily (or unluckily for Dutch, perhaps), they were in a different cell than a famed assortment of Wild West heroes and villains. These were Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Butch and Sundance, the Man with No Name, and even John Wayne.

Wyatt Earp, the Sheriff – curled his bristling 'tache, smiled, touched his hat with his gun – and left for the Minor Fracas at the Mediocre Sheepfold. Not as noted as the OK Corale perhaps, but even Wyatt Earp has to make a living how he can.

The friends arrived just as all these Western legends were having a fist fight. However, this was just a diversion to allow their friends – The Hole in the Wall Gang – to plant dynamite against the outer wall.

With an almighty explosion, a huge hole was blown in the wall and both heroes and villains were free. Mike and co. looked on in amazement, or at least at what they could make out as the smoke and the dust swirled around their much reduced accommodation.

As the smoke and the dust finally cleared from the air, a familiar, bow-legged cowboy stood in the gap where the wall used to be.

"Are ya comin' . . . or what?!' he asked in his famous drawl. He took out his gun and with one shot blew the cell door open, and with a "Yeehaargh!" (from Dutch), the Magnificent Five were soon once again riding on equine pillion seats.

The children looked behind as they galloped along. Giving chase were a now not so friendly Custer and his men – with swords at the ready – and the flag flying. Alongside were the massed Indian armies led by Chief Sitting Bull, and behind these were the Magnificent Seven. Last but not least was a posse made up of Gary Cooper, Audie Murphy, Randolph Scott, Alan Ladd and of course, John Wayne; the acting creme-de-la-creme from Hollywood's golden era of Wild West films.

The massed bounty hunters drew nearer and nearer to Mike and the gang, and bullets and spears whizzed past their heads and their fellow jail busters. As before, the chasers eventually gave up the chase, the horses slowed down, and the friends were back at the clearing which led back to their whirlwind.

After the children had all dismounted, most of the outlaws turned back towards the children, fired several shots into the air, and with one final "Yeeehaaarrggh!", turned again and rode back into town. One remained: he looked over – gave a lopsided smile – raised his hat in salute with his gun barrel – turned away – and rode off into the sunset. . .

The five all walked wearily back along the clearing, and as the whirlwinds came into view they found a smiling Professor Creek waiting for them.

"Never mind, never mind. A valiant try, children. I was going to say that was nothing to sneeze at, but perhaps not, eh. . . ?"

The children gave pretend groans and smiled at Professor Creek, who in turn winked at Dutch.

"As there are plenty of more teams still out there, please get back on board and just relax until we're all done."

Although Mike and his friends were very tired, they sat and talked quietly and every so often looked out to see if anything was happening. The rest of the stragglers eventually returned and climbed back on board their whirlwinds, although the very last team back seemed absolutely soaked to the skin. Rather oddly, they all had huge grins on their faces.

"Tired, everyone?" asked the voice of Professor Winch. "Never mind, if you can stay with us for a short while longer, then we will all be able to watch the winning team in action. Just look to your Magivision screen, and enjoy."

It soon became clear to all of the children as to what the very last clue involving songs, dances, and brollies had all been about.

The opening in the panel at the front was filled with what looked like a perfectly ordinary TV picture, but was the magic world's very own Magivision. Suddenly appearing on the screen were the five students from Solstice who had successfully solved all of the clues, and who had completed all of the stages of this very strange competition.

With an audience of several cloudfuls of teachers and students, the winning team then commenced an hilarious, haphazard watery dance routine based loosely on the film, 'Singin' in the Rain'. This was not just confined to the routine of the original film, but involved a crazy assortment of famous characters and stars from the golden age of Hollywood. The props utilised to drive it all along included out of control studio cranes, ill-timed maintenance work, and even a rampaging water-spouting elephant.

The end result was a completely wrecked film set, and even as the gallant Solstice team held hands and bowed at the end of their chaotic but highly enjoyable routine, a giant letter O from the famous Hollywood sign broke away from its fastenings, rolled down the hill, and knocked all of them over like skittles.

The children aboard all of the whirlwinds were tired no longer, laughing loud and long at this crazy comic masterpiece. However, as we all know only too well, all good things have to come to an end eventually.

"Well done, whirlwind nineteen and Solstice!" proclaimed the professor. "What a show!" The professor was stopped in his tracks by a round of thunderous applause.

"OK, OK, simmer down everyone," finally broke in Professor Winch. "Good, good, that's it. Although we still have much to do, for the moment please feel free to relax and perhaps enjoy the refreshments on offer, and please be patient as we fly like the wind to our next destination."

The children were soon to realise that 'We still have much to do' was rather an understatement. It certainly wasn't all fun and games as we shall soon see, but some of it was still enjoyable.

Their next port of call was a remote area of Iceland called Schnarkenfeld.

As they made their approach, Professor Winch told them all not to alight until told to do so.

When they did finally climb down, they noticed about a hundred armed guards. Some of these were standing close by while others were hovering on broomsticks a short distance away. These were wizards in military uniforms and all were holding large luminous blue wands. The children were not to learn of these for some time, but these were battle-wands, which were guns used by soldier wizards.

After this momentary distraction the children studied this new, strange environment. They were high up on a mountainside overlooking the ocean, but they also had a grand view of much of the country for miles around.

Although all of the staff alighted on this occasion, it was Professor Cornstone who again took the lead, and with his boss only feet away his tone was more civil than usual.

"Don't worry, children, you are not in any danger. The WSS, or the Wizard Special Service, are here just as a precaution in case, of – er – volcano eruptions. Please take a folder and study the pictures therein of various plants and flowers. Your task is to collect at least one of each species and return them here.

"On this occasion this is not a contest as we really do have urgent uses for them. The most valuable plant as far as we are concerned is the magmalia, if you can only find one, make it this one. OK then, no rush and you will find guards within sight at every step."

The children walked off and found themselves in a contrasting land of bleakness and bounty; of hot-water lakes and ice caps; and of geysers, cliffs and waterfalls.

There were massive tracts of tundra alternating with huge areas of lush vegetation. They looked around from the mountainside and saw volcanoes, and lakes with sapphire blue water. They looked northwards to see large boulders sculptured to look like chess pieces; they looked eastwards to the land of the trolls, legend to ordinary people but an everyday fact for magic

folk.

The wind was howling all around them but none of the five felt particularly cold.

Within an hour they had managed to collect every species, bar the magmalia plant, but yet again they got lucky.

"Got ya!" shouted Madeline.

Just as the others went to run over to her, they were distracted by a loud, ferocious, howling noise and what seemed tobe the typical sounds of a thundery ocean surf but magnified to near atomic levels. They heard shouts, screams, what seemed to be rifle fire, and saw huge flashes of multi-coloured light streaming up into the northern sky.

As they looked over, they realised that whatever was happening was doing so at the water's edge.

From their elevated position they could see enormous dark shadows on the water, but after just a few seconds many of these seemed to disappear beneath the waves.

The children's attention was then drawn to what could only be described as dot-like shapes, racing over the land.

"I am sorry, children, but we have fallen behind schedule. Please return immediately with your samples," said the disembodied voice of Professor Winch, who was only just managing to remain calm.

"Summat's up 'ere!" exclaimed Dutch.

"You don't say!" said Mike.

"Maybe it's a double booking with another school and we've been cancelled," suggested Abigail.

"A booking for what? That didn't sound like any school activity to me," said the dismissive Leo.

"No, I suppose not," said Abigail, "not out here, but I thought it might have been like our crazy maths lesson yesterday."

"Yeah, with armed guards to make sure we don't sag off!" mocked Mike.

"All right!" said an annoyed Abigail.

"Sorry," said Mike, and sheepishly smiled at Abigail while Madeline quickly linked her vulnerable friend.

Together, with the rest of the mystified students escorted rather too close for comfort by quite a number of guards, they handed in their samples to Professor Cornstone.

The professor quickly checked each sample and then ticked them off on a chart before placing them in crates.

A nervous looking Professor Winch stood there holding a sheet of paper. He looked rather white-faced and he seemed impatient to get everyone back on board.

Before Mike and his friends had gone past, a gust of wind blew the paper out of Professor Winch's hand. Mike saw this and quickly retrieved it. After casually glancing down, Mike couldn't help but notice that it was an itinerary. He couldn't read all of it before handing it back, but he did see:

'North America:
A. Wild West. B. Hollywood.
Europe:
A. Lithuania B. Romania C. Iceland. D. Norway.
Asia/Oceania:
A. Mauritius B. Australia
UK:
A. Blackpool B. Thornton
C. Glastonbury. D. Home'.

An uncharacteristically rude Professor Winch snatched the sheet out of Mike's hands; but, as far as Mike could tell he had not seemed to notice that Mike had seen and read at least some of it.

Once back on board there was an immediate announcement, but this time from Professor Creek. His voice, similar to the headmaster's a few moments before, had a slight panicky sound to it.

"I am sorry to curtail your sample collecting, but we have fallen behind in the schedule and we have to return back to the school. However, I'm sure you have all enjoyed your day tremendously, and I am equally sure you'll be glad to hear that it's not quite over yet as we will shortly be having our return quiz.

"OK then, children please buckle up, we'll be back in the air shortly. Thank you." The somewhat less than hale and heartiness had not gone unnoticed.

"Something is very definitely not right here," said a sombre Mike, "and it's not just the panic in their voices. I read Professor Winch's sheet and we were supposed to go to some other places, but now we're going straight back to school."

"What other places?" asked Madeline.

"I can't remember them all, but I know we were supposed to go to Blackpool, and some place called Thornton."

"Thornton? Near Crosby?" again asked Madeline, with surprise in her voice.

"Dunno. What's so special about there?" replied Mike.

"I've got family there," said Madeline.

"Oh, so we all call in on Auntie, er – Jeannette for tea, and what is it – scouse?" mocked Leo, so near the mark in one way but without realising it.

"Oh shut up, will you!" retorted Madeline.

"Nah, Ithink you're wrong. There's another Thornton near Blackpool, that's probably where we were going," suddenly piped up Dutch.

"Oh yeah, forgot about that one," said Madeline.

The rather frayed chatter came to an abrupt halt as a rather too jolly Professor Creek announced the start of the next quiz.

All strange goings on in Iceland were soon forgotten: books were grabbed, flung, even torn in the children's panic to be the first with the correct answer. There were even howls of laughter at an Amulet girl's answer of 'Neil Armstrong', uttered hastily in answer to the question of who was the first

man on the Earth according to ancient beliefs.

Again, most teams struggled with the harder questions, and again it was close as the final question loomed ever nearer.

It was so close that Camelot, Solstice and Equinox were all on one-hundred and forty points, but sadly an uninspired Amulet were out of the running on sixty-five points.

"Ready?" asked Professor Creek. "And don't forget, the final question is a fifty pointer.

"OK then! . . . Oh, sorry, nearly forgot, it's yet another cryptic rhyme, so have your explanations at the ready. . . "

The children groaned at these false starts.

"Twenty-one is so dark, but not in the South.
Twenty-five is such fun from packet to mouth.
Twenty-six is for fighters or dip in the lake.
Thirty-one is for Scots who stay up late.
My first is Four, my last is Eighteen.
Something that's yearly, will show what I mean."

There was as usual a frantic search of the reading material on the bookshelf, but even before the first page had been opened on any of the whirlwinds. . .

"CHRISTMAS!" yelled a jubilant Bruce D'Acort.

"My my! That was quick! We have an answer, folks!" cried Professor Creek.

Bruce D'Acort smiled; he had got revenge. Or had he? He hadn't even waited for the professor to finish and had not even consulted his teammates as he was so sure he had the right answer.

"But was it the right answer? NO!" exclaimed Professor Creek. "I'm sorry, but under the rules your team is disqualified. The other teams, please continue. . ."

While Bruce's teammates hurled abuse at their over-confident self-proclaimed leader, and loud groans emanated from the rest of their house aboard other whirlwinds, the Magnificent Five breathed a sigh of relief.

"A calendar! That's something yearly!" yelled Abigail. Although the others could not disagree they did not mean it to be the final answer, but an over-stressed Abigail certainly did. She took the pen and was about to write it down, when Leo stopped her.

"No no no! That's just one of the clues! It's something on a calendar!"

"Yes, but it isn't Christmas, is it?" said Dutch.

"Christmas is on a calendar!" insisted Mike.

"Yes, but that's not the answer!" shouted Dutch.

"What is it, then?" asked Mike, but rather sarcastically.

"Look, we might lose, we probably will after all this time wasting, but let's go through the clues again. What's all this twenty-one and twenty-five business for a kick off?" asked Madeline.

"Dates, but as we know, the answer's not Christmas!" spluttered a demented Dutch.

"No, but it is December!" suddenly exclaimed Abigail.

"Put that down!" yelled the other four in unison.

Abigail grabbed the pen and wrote their answer down. No doubt due to the bated breath caused by the tension, no-one followed up with a yell.

"And we have another answer, folks! . . . Yes, that's correct! But don't forget, we need a full explanation. . ."

The five groaned as they had totally forgotten about this part.

Abigail, thinking they had blown it, did her best. "Er – well now. . ." ('Shortest day' whispered Mike, suddenly inspired).

"Oh, yes, twenty-one, which means the twenty-first of December, is the shortest day, but – erm – not in Australia, which is south! (Abigail suddenly remembered her aunt in Australia enjoying long, hot summer days in December). Then – erm – the twenty-fifth is Christmas Day. . ."

('Presents and food!' nearly whispered Leo).

" . . . Got it! There's loads of presents all, wrapped up, in – er – packets and things – and there's loads of food to eat and drink to – er – drink – that's the mouth business, and – er – fun. . .

" . . . The twenty-sixth is Boxing Day, that's the fighting clue, and – erm – erm. .."

('The Boxing Day swimming race in the Serpentine,' whispered Madeline).

"The Boxing Day swimming race in the turpentine!" almost repeated Abigail the parrot, who had never heard of this before.

"Thirty-first is New Year's Eve, or Hogmanay in Scotland – that's the bit about the Scottish staying up late, and then – oh, dear. . ."

('D & R are the fourth and eighteenth letters in the alphabet!', again not quite whispered Leo).

" . . . And D is fourth and R is eighteenth in the alphabet! And it can all be found on a calendar which is yearly!" said Abigail, finishing with a flourish.

After an initial smile and a cough from Professor Creek upon visualising some Yuletide reveller diving in to a lake full of turps, he let the minor error go.

"Correct! The Camelot team from Whirlwind six are again our winners! Two in a row! This hasn't happened since – well – for a long time! That's more points in the bag for Camelot, and your own prize is – a seven course meal at Patty's Patisserie!"

"Turpentine?!" protested Bruce D'Acort.

7

More Lessons

IT WAS THE NEXT MORNING. Five very weary youngsters forced themselves to get up, get washed and dressed and go to breakfast.

Their first lesson was Music with Madam Florence Koslovsky, a small, grey haired, frail looking woman with a heavily lined face. Although they didn't suit her, she wore huge cat's eye glasses; but music was her forte and she taught this with ferocious energy, with the wearying of age suspended – for a while at least.

Although the children thought this was going to be one of the purely non-magic subjects, they were very wrong indeed. The inherent magic of the subject was to the children more bizarre than anything they had seen so far in their first four days.

At the side of the room were what looked like exercise bikes connected to a series of pedals, levers, cogs and buttons. At a right angle to these, were, first of all, two raised circular rostrums, and then very slightly set back was some sort of conveyor belt – and inbuilt into this were smaller wooden circles.

Madam Koslovsky smiled as she waited patiently for the children to find seats.

"Welcome, children. I will begin our new class together by telling you some rather sad news . . . Magic-Music is a traditional art that our community is in danger of losing. However, before we are forced to watch its embers dying in the night, I will do my best to raise fire in your bellies and stoke up a deep love for such a magnificent yet fragile ancient art. My hope for you all is that such passion will stay with you for the rest of your lives, burn deep into your hearts, and which will in turn inspire future generations to carry the flame themselves."

Unfortunately, despite the undoubted eloquence of Madam Koslovsky, the truth is, most eleven year old children are normally not yet that familiar with metaphor, simile and analogy filled oratory. Although Madeline and Abigail and a handful of others knew what the old lady meant – Mike, Leo and Dutch, as well as many others, most certainly did not.

"Is she setting us on fire or something?" whispered Dutch.

Before either of the girls could answer, our frail, tired old lady proved that her ears were exempt from such woes of ageing.

"Yes, my little blonde haired beautiful boy! Oh, I see it – yes, how I see it! I shall set you alight with a fire that has never been seen since Beethoven, or Bach, or Mendelsohn! You shall burn bright, my boy! Burn! Burn! Burn! So that the world will see! So that the world will *know!*"

"Blimey!" said Dutch.

Madam Koslovsky gave out books – music manuals, to the class.

"Please open the manuals at page one. As you can see, we are at the elementary stage."

The class read the first few pages along with Madam Koslovsky.

There were diagrams as well as explanations of what they had to do, which would enable the children to create the music suggested in the book.

The first such suggestion was, '*London's Burning*'.

The children smiled as it dawned upon them that somehow the music would be created through riding the magic exercise bikes – apart from Dutch – who had visions of his own beloved East 'Am going up in flames as the class pedalled faster and faster.

"So, firstly, have you all heard the tune, *'London's Burning'*?" Most but not all hands in the class were raised.

"Very good. And now I need a volunteer. Who will stand in front of the class and sing it for me?"

All but one of the hands were lowered far faster than they had been raised. The one hand still in the air belonged to Mike Miller, but only because he had been distracted by Dutch, who was still worried as to whether he (and his family back home), were going to survive the lesson.

"Ah, a brave, brave boy. What is your name, young sir?"

"Oh – er – Miss Miller Mike – er – Mike Miss Miller, sorry, it's Mike Miller, Miss," said the very nervous Mike.

"Your nerves will disappear in a puff of smoke, I promise you! ('Blimey!' said Dutch).

"First of all, Michael, do you see the rostrum to the right? If you would be so good and stand there, I will tell you when to start. And another volunteer, please? (Madam Koslovsky looked around at the reluctant children with their arms held stiffly at their sides) No? Come on, children! You don't want the world to think your mother raised a jibber, do you?"

This had the desired effect on the biggest lad in the Camelot first years, Tobias Jordache. He wanly smiled and raised his hand. After giving his name he was directed to sit on one of the bicycles.

"Ready? Good! You will notice a speedometer. All you have to do is maintain the speed of the bike at one mile an hour. Please begin!"

Tobias started peddling and very soon the speedometer read eighty-one miles an hour. He soon realised that this was far from any bike he had ever ridden or seen before. Tobias slowed right down, and very soon was at the requisite one mile per hour.

"Sing, if you would, please, young man," asked Madam Koslovsky of Mike Miller.

A very red-faced Mike coughed – and in a voice that initially sounded like a cat at midnight on a garden wall, he started to sing, 'London's burning, London's burning. . .'

The circular rostrum began to revolve around itself as did the one to the

left.

There were gasps of amazement from the whole class as another Mike Miller appeared on the second rostrum, just as it came back to complete a full turn.

The second Mike then travelled along the conveyor belt, stopped at the end, and sang out in a beautiful clear voice – 'London's burning, London's burning. . .'

Madam Koslovsky gestured for the real Mike to stop and return to his seat. He felt very strange and more than a bit embarrassed as another two versions of himself appeared, with each singing out in an angelic voice.

The three magic Mikes sang the song in a round, with each one at a different part of the song.

Eventually the first Mike stopped, then the second, leaving just the third musical replicant to finish.

Mike, the real Mike, blushed even more as the class burst into applause.

"Yes, well done, Mr Miller! And you, too, Toby!" enthused Madam Koslovsky (which drew a sullen look from Tobias). "I'm sure you all appreciate that just like most of your other lessons this week, that this was just a bit of fun. However, next week you will begin to learn how to create more complex music. Our year long project is to perfect then present Mozart's *'The Magic Flute'* – to the whole school in the final week of the summer term.

"Oh my friends! I see the bonfires burning proudly in your very beings! I see you all aflame with love of a great art! Thank you, children – I look forward to our next lesson."

'Blimey!' said Dutch.

The class, minus Dutch, politely thanked their dramatic, highly unorthodox but nonetheless brilliant teacher, and it was straight off to their second maths lesson of the week with Miss Fortune.

Again it was off to the Arena, and again it was one wild roller-coaster of a lesson in which the students themselves became the integral components of animated equations. It was much harder on this occasion as their teacher had promised, and not all (especially Leo and Dutch), were any the wiser as to what was what when it was all over.

There was even more laughter, courtesy of Abigail. Currently a decimal point, she positioned herself five points out of where she should have been, and within an instant the whole Arena was swamped by millions of rabbits instead of just seven.

Their second history lesson was a bit of a let-down. Professor Bookbinder did on this occasion get them to read from a dusty old book, *'Law and order during the reign of King Arthur'*.

The one thing all children dread at one time or another – actually happened. Leo fell fast asleep and snored and drooled all over the priceless tome. He was woken up rather dramatically by the old professor. Old Alfred levitated the table, the chair, and of course, Leo – and let them all fall with a bang. After getting over the initial shock, Leo saw the old man smiling.

"How did I learn that one, laddie?" he said in his faint Scottish accent. "After happening to me twenty-seven times in one year! That's how! I thought I'd get my own back, but I never did. And neither will you!" But he was still smiling as he said this.

Another new lesson was community spirit. The teacher for this subject was a young well-dressed man with shortish ginger hair, Mr Algernon Hockwater. He spoke in a squeaky, nervous, excitable voice, but the children soon realised that more importantly, he was a nice man.

"Before we go on, I will just quickly explain the basics of the subject: these are to foster and maintain good relations between the villagers and the school. I hope it will instil the need in all of you to always offer to help such good friends in their times of need – as they without fail – do so for us when we require help. OK then, children, follow me, quickly now."

He took the class on a trip around the village. Here they were formally introduced to some of the ancillary community.

First of all they were introduced to Aunt Hattie of the famed Sweet Emporium. As well as running the shop, she was the main supplier of confections for school functions. She was a huge hulk of a woman of the type often seen on seaside postcards, dragging along a pathetic bag of bones on skin sometimes referred to as the husband. Josh Beecham, Aunt Hattie's much criticised nephew, was also there, but despite being civil to the visitors he seemed to have other things on his mind.

Next on the agenda was to call in on School Caretaker, Harry Gripweed, and his wife, Trixie, who happened to be Hattie Beecham's sister.

Harry brought all twenty students into theliving room oftheir small cottage where they were all just about able to fit in, courtesy of cushions squashed together here and there. Harry told them his duties at the school, such as how he combined magic with good old fashioned elbow grease. He regaled them with stories of generations of past students who had broken a number of rules and had then paid the price.

Among these priceless yarns was the tale of Tom Carpenter's predicament after eating Chinese Flipper Fruits. This brought about such uproarious laughter that the children found that their ribs began to ache. The trouble here was that they began to ache even more upon hearing how Harry himself had got into a spot of bother, many years before. . .

Unbeknown to either Harry or his one–time colleague, Toke Bottomley, the Annual Gala and Grand Supper, a huge celebration for the whole of the magic community of the British Isles – held yearly at Hemlock Hall – had been cancelled due to dragon-flu'. However, the then new headmaster, a young-ish, eager Professor Winch, turned up at the vegetable stores, found no-one there, and so left a note saying to cancel the potatoes which were always ordered from the nearby farm.

Toke turned up, saw the note, ripped it up, and then forgot to cancel the order – at first. To add to the confusion, Harry and Toke kept missing each other. Toke left to commence cleaning the windows, Harry turned up,

supervised the delivery of three tons of potatoes, and left. Toke returned, nearly fainted, grabbed a wand, and made the potatoes disappear and left for home. Harry came back, nearly collapsed in panic, and ran all the way to Shadowbrooke Farm to see where the spuds had got to.

It took the ordering and reordering of a total of twenty-four tons of potatoes, before both men finally met up and for it to become clear as to what had happened.

Professor Winch, although under pressure to sack at least Toke if not Harry as well, realised his own part in the matter and took no further action. This was despite the Board of Governors, quite understandably, being more than a little upset after receiving the huge bill for twenty-four tons of King Arthur potatoes, of which twenty-one tons no longer existed.

All good things have to come to an end, although far later than Mr Hockwater had planned.

The class very reluctantly left to go on to meet the village farrier and blacksmith, Jez Gildebrand – a ferocious looking mountain of a man but who was in reality very friendly. This visit was cut short to ensure the children could get to visit Farmer Harris, and have just a quick look around Shadowbrooke Farm.

After a particularly muddy excursion across the fields and back, it was time for tea.

Again there was a night lesson – broomstick skills. This worried the girls, despite their initial enthusiasm, but the boys were – seemingly – delighted. However, a combination of Dutch taking himself off to the edge of the Arena to throw up, and Mike and Leo and several other boys sporting somewhat worry-lined ashen faces, this was somewhat in doubt.

After ten minutes of a floodlit lesson in the Arena the children felt a lot easier. They found out that it was illegal for students under thirteen to fly broomsticks unsupervised, but their relief again turned to horror – but only for a few minutes. A series of cranes had been installed, and at the end of the cables hanging from each crane was a broomstick. The cables were lowered to pitch level and each of the students were asked to sit astride a broomstick.

With a scream (from Abigail, Dutch, as well as Tobias), the broomsticks started moving, but they were perfectly safe, although some of the students were far from convinced of this. Thinking they were going to be holding on for dear life at five-hundred feet, most went as white as a sheet.

A degree of relief returned as they realised the crane was simply taking them very slowly around the Arena, and virtually at ground level.

With colour slowly returning to their faces, the practical lesson was over not long after it had started.

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It was Friday. Mike, his friends, and just about every other first year student, were still tired and hoped that Saturday would come quicker than time usually allowed it to.

They had their first English lesson with Mr Benwick Titherley, the youngest teacher at the school, having graduated from Lesterjester University only the year before. The years of stuffy formality were yet to visit Mr Titherley, and so the children found him to be full of fun and mischief.

The fresh-faced teacher's antics were (just about) tolerated by the headmaster and deputy, although they sometimes wished it was seventy years on, and that young Benwick was as old and grey and as stooped and studious as the esteemed Professor Bookbinder.

The young and somewhat immature teacher pulled his biggest and almost catastrophic stunt so far, although the Magnificent Five were still glad to have been part of it.

Mr Titherley took them on a trip back in time: he sneaked the class into Professor Book binder's room and down the magic staircase to Victorian London, and to the very moment that Charles Dickens was about to come up with the character, Ebenezer Scrooge.

Mr Titherley sneaked up and put his mouth to old Charlie's right ear and whispered, 'Gerry Hubcap'. Mr Dickens stopped – frowned – and shrugged his shoulders. Gerry Hubcap it was.

The class were rushed back up the staircase and on to the library where Mr Titherley snatched a copy of *'A Christmas Carol'* from the shelf, put it down on the table so all could see, and scrabbled through the pages.

"By Merlin's whiskers! It worked!" shouted young Benwick.

"Shush!" came the retort from several readers, as well as Letitia Minsk, the librarian.

The children looked for themselves to read all about Hubcap and Marley, and "Gerry Hubcap! Come in and know me better man!" – as shouted by the Ghost of Christmas Present. And instead of the more usual reference to Ebenezer Scrooge, the inscription on the headstone as featured in scenes from the last visitation, now read: *'R.I.P Gerry Hubcap'*.

As the children were doing their best to muffle their laughter, a message suddenly appeared on the page. "Mr Titherley – headmaster's office – NOW!"

"Er – sir," said Madeline.

"Poor lad," said Abigail.

"Blimey!" said Dutch, although on this occasion it was not with the added fear of ending up like one of Salem's finest.

The next three lessons were a shock to the system.

The geography lesson had no magical distractions, and the class had to knuckle down to study population movements followed by the problem with the ozone layer.

The children gladly moved on to their only out and out non-sporting magic subject – cauldron and wand skills. However, Miss Llefevre had them all working on tolerance and compatibility – or lack thereof – when using similar but not exactly the same ingredients and commodities when working on a variety of spells and potions.

With red, bleary eyes they arrived at what Mike assumed would be their

very last lesson of their first week, but it wasn't really a lesson – it was an introduction to the workings of the School Secretariat.

Mike and his classmates were finally to meet the mad secretary herself, Jacinta Morse.

8

Swings and Roundabouts

THE CHILDREN APPROACHED the school secretary's office, which was just to the left of the Main Hall. "Gather round, gather round! That's it! No stuffiness in my office!" said a smiling Jacinta at the door. She looked and seemed nothing like her alter ego, Debbie Freeman the ruthless career woman.

They all trooped in to find that filling Jacinta Morse's office were a variety of different chairs, many of which were not really chairs at all in the usual sense but simply there to be used as such.

There was a miniature roundabout attached to the floor which seated three. There were children's swings hanging from the ceiling, a few large adjustable Pullman chairs, and a large yellow plastic bench against the wall, which Mike thought must have been liberated from a bus stop in Barnswick. There was also a pile of badly worn tyres, a huge throne, and a giant settee which could easily seat nine.

"Sit down, everyone, sit down! Come on now, don't be shy! Choose a seat! We have much to discuss!"

After a moment's hesitation from the children, bedlam then ensued. Tobias and his newly formed gang went for the bench. The roundabout and settee were quickly filled, while Mike grabbed one of the Pullmans and Dutch sat on the throne. Leo plonked himself down on top of the tyres, Abigail and Madeline nabbed a swing each, and the rest of the class bagged whatever they could from whatever was left.

"Good, good! Onwards and upwards, eh?! Now, as to why you are here. First of all, it is so I can explain to you all the workings of my office. This will include what I expect of you, but just as importantly, what you can expect of me. After we've covered this, then I will need to talk to some of you privately, but more of that later."

Jacinta first of all explained that the office of the school secretary was not really just a person, but more a department, albeit a small one. Its main duties, continued the secretary, centred on dealing with the school's administration, including co-ordinating both the teaching and support staff's lessons and extracurricular schedules, as well as arranging many functions, both internal as well as those that involved the wider magic community.

To the children, her duties didn't seem that much different to the secretary of an ordinary school, but her manner was certainly bizarre but very friendly with it.

" . . . And so, children, enough of letters and talking to visitors and appeasing the French Ambassador and so on. I now need to discuss with some of you, private financial affairs. I will call each of you in turn, but while the rest of you are waiting, please feel free to play a little game I invented to stop my own two from removing each other's heads without anaesthetic. It's called furniture tennis. So, Holly Kendal, follow me, please."

Holly rose to go, but then stopped. Right in the middle of the room appeared a mini whirlwind of the type used on the field trip.

"Come along, Holly! You'll miss the ballet!"

Holly, who was from a family of ballet dancers, suddenly perked up and seemed to leap into the whirlwind. With a mighty whoosh, the whirlwind and Holly and Jacinta disappeared at great speed through the window.

Each child then found that a plastic baseball bat had appeared upon their lap. Each of the class either turned or shouted over to their friends to discuss this rather strange situation.

"What's all this about?!" exclaimed Leo.

"Dunno. It's like a dream," said Mike.

"A nightmare, you mean. Hey, Abigail! I never thought I'd meet someone else as nutty as you!" said the unkind Dutch.

"Charming." retorted Abigail.

"Here!" suddenly shouted Madeline, who had also found a table tennis ball on her knee.

Madeline threw the ball up in the air, swung the bat, and whacked the ball as hard as she could at Dutch. At the same time, the swing she was on began to swing to and fro, slowly at first, but then it began to go faster.

"Wheee!" said Madeline the suddenly immature.

The ball did not hit Dutch but stopped dead in mid-air and hovered right in front of him. He went to hit it with his bat, but the ball dodged to one side. Dutch swung again, the ball went to the other side, but then Dutch had a brainwave. He swung his bat slowly to the right, but then suddenly changed tack and swung it straight out. Bingo! Dutch whacked the ball right over to the other side of the room, and almost immediately the throne he was sitting on began to float up towards the ceiling. The ball was thwacked again by Tobias and he too went up in the air.

Within a couple of minutes every child was floating around the room on their chairs of sorts, whizzing round both ways at high-speed and hitting the table tennis ball as hard as they could.

After a few minutes of frantic furniture tennis, Adam Volynchook accidentally hit the ball straight through an open window. There followed a dinging noise, and a large golden *'1'* suddenly appeared on Jacinta's wall-planner. A second ball appeared, just hovering in the middle of the room.

Due to this extra novelty, from that moment on the whole class just wanted to hit the ball out of the window to score as many points as possible.

The strange arrangement of airborne furniture became more intricate in its aerodynamic display. The settee and the bench both dived down at angles allowing one of the sitters to return the ball. The swings seemed not to obey the laws of physics and manoeuvred right around the room as if free of

ropes, and the Pullmans careered left and right as they shot up and down. Dutch even found himself going upside down on the throne as he was whacking the ball in Sarah's direction, but did not even feel as if there was the slightest chance of falling off.

The crazy ball game was now being played at a frantic pace, with children, furniture and ping-pong ball zooming all over the room at an alarmingly high speed.

Mike's Pullman chair seemed to have an invisible eye, and seemed to spot the ball in the corner of the room. It tilted back, and then suddenly shot forward at an angle in hot pursuit of the ball, with Mike poised to strike out with his bat. But Mike, the chair and the ball came to a sudden halt, as did all of the other airborne furniture and its passengers. This was regardless of what position they all found themselves in at that moment.

"Michael Miller! This way please!" came Jacinta's voice.

Dutch, still upside down and now with a very ruddy face, shouted "See you later, Mike!"

Mike's chair levelled out, made a slow landing, and Mike walked over to the strange gaseous mist in the corner. An amazed Holly stepped out of the whirlwind, allowing Mike to step into it. As the foggy door began to close behind him, Mike could just about hear 'Yeehaaah!' from Abigail, as the fun started up again.

"Hello, Mike, please sit down," said Jacinta.

Mike found himself on board exactly the same type of whirlwind he had been on two days previously. He sat facing Jacinta Morse.

"I won't keep you long, Mike, but you, as well as a few of the others, have had to have the security of their finances handed over to the school. First of all, if you promise not to shout and jump up and down, I will give you some good news. Regardless of whether it's in funny money or our own, you are a billionaire."

"Yes! Yeeeees! Yes – yes – yes – yes!" shouted Mike, jumping up and down and punching the air. Mike knew he was well-off – but – a billionaire?!

"Hmmm . . . silly me," smiled Jacinta.

"A billionaire?! A real billionaire?! Like that computer bloke and that fella who owns most of the country?!" asked Mike, in a very loud voice.

"The Duke of Magicombe?"

"Yeah, that's him."

"Yes," again smiled Jacinta.

"Stuff your job!"

"Pardon?" retorted Jacinta.

"Oh, sorry, that's what my dad can say to the bus company when I tell him."

"I already have, Mike!" said Jack Miller, who was standing at the rear of the whirlwind with Mike's mum, Elsie.

"Mum! — Dad! When did you get here?! *HOW* did you get here?!"

"Just now, son – we – er – rode like the wind!"

"Brilliant! How long can you stay?"

"Not long, son," replied Elsie.

"But long enough to go to the cup final!" added Jack.

"But it's only September. How can that be?" said Mike.

Jack and Elsie just smiled, with Jacinta chomping at the bit to explain.

"We're going back in time, Mike. We're going to see the 1966 World Cup Final!"

"Amazing! I can't believe this!" exclaimed Mike.

"You had better believe it. Because we're here!" squealed Jacinta.

Moments later, Mike Miller, his mum and dad, as well as Jacinta Morse, were sitting watching from the window of their whirlwind which was hovering on top of Wembley Stadium. This was just as England were about to beat West Germany four-two to win the 1966 World Cup.

"There's some people on the roof! They think it's all over! It is now!" shouted the commentator as the fourth goal was scored.

The party of four stayed to watch the game out – and then as the whirlwind sped back through time, they seated themselves around the table to discuss Mike's weekly allowance, cashable at the village bank.

It seemed disappointing to Mike (but only at first), that his parents had agreed that Mike should not go overboard with regard to his highly privileged status. His allowance would still be generous, though – as Mike would be when spending it.

Mr and Mrs Miller had also decided, although without telling Mike, that for the purposes of grounding, familiarity and continuity, they would continue to live much the same life as they had always done. Apart from leaving their jobs, they would not be hobnobbing with the gentry, and they would continue to live in the same house, do the same things, and keep the same friends.

Mike eventually said his farewells and stepped back into Jacinta Morse's office, only eight minutes after he had departed.

The furniture tennis game was still in full flow as Tobias took his turn to go off in the whirlwind. The children had amassed eighty-nine points. However, school caretaker Harry Gripweed was not happy, in fact he was cursing them all from outside, and not just because of the mess – he was holding a handkerchief to his bleeding head after a Tobias special.

As they all trooped out of the office exhausted and exhilarated, they all asked each other about what had happened in the whirlwind and where it had taken them.

It turned out that Abigail had been taken to the Cloisters ski resort where she had been given ski-ing lessons by Prince Charles. As for Dutch, he had played drums with the Cockney pop combo, Chas and Dave, while Madeline had become companion to Lady Miriam, the Duchess of Magicombe. This was while travelling from Paris to Venice on the Orient Express. Leo had hosted his own cooking programme on worldwide television. Unfortunately, this had ended in uproar when the producer prompted him to invite one of the studio

audience to share the finished meal – only to find that Leo had already eaten the lot.

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It was Friday evening. The tired group of youngsters were not up to doing anything special so just sat around talking. They all turned in for an early night – they needed it.

Saturday morning breakfast was gloriously ignored by all, but they eventually met up in the common room around 11:00 a.m.

The friends decided to take a walk around the village; their first port of call was to be Aunt Hattie's. The trouble was, when they got there they found that it was closed, and although they couldn't be certain they thought they could hear Aunt Hattie herself sobbing her heart out on the other side of the closed door. Their initial reaction was that it was nothing to do with them, but they all remembered their community spirit lesson – eventually.

"Shall we get help?" asked Mike.

"Dunno," replied Leo and Dutch at the same time.

"Yes," said Abigail very firmly. This wasn't taken as a suggestion but rather a very definite answer – the right answer.

"Come on, we'll see if any of the teachers are around," said Madeline.

They abandoned their walk and went back into the school. Luckily, they found Professor Winch himself perusing a newspaper which had been left on one of the tables in the main hall.

"Excuse me, sir, but we think there's a problem at Aunt Hattie's," said Abigail.

"Hmmm? Problem? What sort of problem?" replied the professor.

"She's crying," added Madeline.

"Who is crying?" asked the professor.

"Aunt Hattie!" said all five, and although they couldn't help it, rather impatiently.

"Oh, dear," sighed the professor as he took off his spectacles and put them in his pocket. "I was half expecting this."

The children realised that Professor Winch had said this more to himself than to them. He took out his spectacles from his waistcoat pocket, put them on, took them off again, wiped them, and put them back in his pocket.

"Thank you, children, for bringing this to my attention. You have obviously taken your community spirit lessons to heart – I wish it were always the case. Now I'm sure that everything will be fine. I will call in on the good lady myself – so please run along before you waste your whole weekend."

"Yes, sir, thank you," said Madeline.

"Thanks, sir," said the others almost in unison.

"What do you think is going on?" asked Mike.

"I think there's problems with that Josh bloke, he seemed miles away – worried even, when we were there the other day."

"Yeah, I noticed that as well," agreed Mike, "still, there's nothing we can do, is there. . . ?"

The others reluctantly agreed that indeed there wasn't.

The friends decided to ask if they were allowed to go beyond the village on their own, as they all wanted a proper look around Shadowbrooke Farm. They nabbed Tom Carpenter, who was as usual in a rush, and again brandishing a jumbo guitar.

"Um? Oh . . . oh, yes, of course, no problem. All that the school and Farmer Harris ask, is that you don't make a nuisance of yourselves."

"We won't!" they all yelled, and off they ran across the field.

As they approached the farm they saw two figures standing and talking. As they got even nearer they realised they were actually shouting at each other, but not only that, they knew who they were. It was Farmer Harris, a short but stocky fellow with a shock of grey hair all sticking up. The other was the last person they wanted to meet – Professor Cornstone.

"What do you want?!" shouted Farmer Harris to the five, and very rudely considering how nice he had been the other day.

"Er – well, we came to look around the farm," said Mike.

"Get on with it then! 'N' don' annoy ole Bezzie, the darn beast is in a shockin' bad mood today!"

The children were in two minds. Their gut reaction was to turn straight back, but as they hadn't actually been told to go by the farmer, they thought they may as well have at least a quick look round.

The two men recommenced their rowing, but a lot quieter than before they had spotted the visitors.

The farm was basically one large farmhouse, two barns, a sheepfold, a pigsty, a cow-shed, a variety of other sheds and outbuildings, one very muddy courtyard made even worse by animal droppings, and the whole place stank. The larger animals were all out in the fields, while chickens ran around the whole farm along with the occasional duck and even one or two turkeys.

The farm labourers, acting as if they were born with cow dung behind their ears, walked past occasionally. They were all pleasant enough, saying 'G'moarnin!' as they went past. But they didn't walk past fast enough, as the children managed to overhear a conversation between two of them – in a perfect Oxford English accent. Their little joke had been rumbled. All of the labourers were undergraduates in summer jobs and had not yet gone back to Lesterjester University.

In the first barn the children found a mound of spuds.

"Let's make 'em disappear!" suggested Dutch.

"Oh no! We'd get Harry into trouble!" pleaded Abigail.

"He's only joking," said Mike.

"No I'm not!" said Dutch.

"You can't, mate. We'd all get the chop, no bother, and they'd probably think Harry had something to do with it this time as well," said Leo with a chuckle. His lack of sincerity gave away the fact that he too wished they could indeed make the spuds disappear, but without repercussions – or

without playing the drums twice as his joker of a dad often says.

"Let's go on, then. Mouldy ole spuds! We're on an' afternoon out an' we're standin' 'ere lookin' at mouldy ole spuds," moaned and groaned Dutch.

"He's right, though," said Madeline, "let's go."

They walked around a little more and came across Bezzie, just standing there in the second barn. They thought it was rather an ugly looking cow, but stopped to stroke it nevertheless. Bezzie gave them all a funny look, and snorted.

"Farmer Harris is right, she is in a bad mood. Let's go," suggested Abigail, more out of sympathy for the beast.

All bar Dutch turned to walk back out, when they heard more louder, angrier snorting and a scraping of hooves on the ground. At that moment Dutch was looking at a little gold rosette tied around Bezzie's neck. After reading what was written on the rosette, he gasped and then glanced up and saw two horns, causing him to let go of the rosette rather quickly. Dutch dashed past his friends, but still had the good sense to pass on a suggestion which he thought might just help at that moment.

"RUN!"

Without asking why, although they all now had an idea, they all dashed out of the barn and over the fields. They ran three-hundred yards, stopped, and looked round, relieved to have got away.

"RUN!" shouted Leo. Again.

They hadn't got away – a very angry Bezzie had broken free, had stampeded right through the barn wall, had raced across the field and was almost within goring distance of the five. The friends turned and ran again, reached a gate, ran through and shut it very quickly – and ran on again in case Bezzie had been a show jumping horse in a former life. Thankfully, that wasn't the case; a snorting Bezzie had snorted all the anger out and was now trotting back to the barn. Once they had all got their breath back, Dutch explained that Bezzie wasn't a yocal form of Bessie, but a shortened version of *'Best Bernard'*. It turned out that Best Bernard was a prize bull, and had recently won Best in Breed at the recent County Fair.

The five were now back on the lane, about half a mile from school.

Quite by accident, they found themselves walking five abreast as if they were taking part in a famous gunfight. Dutch started to quietly sing, 'Do not forsake me, oh, my Darlin'' from the famous cowboy film*, 'High Noon'*, and reached for his non-existent Colt 45. This was the preferred make of handgun for most cowboys of the Wild West.

Madeline smiled and linked Abigail, and purely out of their deepening friendship, each girl turned to one of the lads, linked him – and were very soon like the Magnificent Seven Minus Two – or would have been if Mike, who was at one end, had not given Leo, floundering on his own – a rather embarrassed look. In turn, Leo gave a look of relief and carried on walking alongside the gang of four, but Madeline was having none of it. She unlinked Abigail and in her half-Scouse voice, shouted, "Gerrin' the middle, ya big

pudd'n!" Leo shuffled in between the two girls and he was immediately linked by both.

The rest of the day was spent going in and out of the little shops, bar the sweetshop, of course, although Ma Halliwell's did sell a few sugary goodies and drinks. They slurped and burped their way on to Patty's Patisserie, and decided to go in and see if they could book their two free meals they had won on the field trip. They walked in through the little door with lace curtains, ignored the snooty waiter humphing at them, and walked up to the counter at the side of the shop. They decided to try and book the next two Friday evenings as it wouldn't matter if they were late back. A rather posh looking lady with a frilly blouse, hair in a small bun and glasses on a chain – smiled, listened as they explained their business – and promptly booked them in for the following two Fridays at 8:00 p.m.

On their way out they noticed Professor Winch sitting at one of the far tables, talking quietly to the still tearful Hattie Beecham. The usually formidable lady was actually crying into her treble brandy. With them were Harry and Trixie. They noticed the children but very unusually for all of them, they all gave the classic "Not just now, thanks" look, and went back to their conversation.

"As if we wanted to know anyway!" said Dutch.

"I do!" said Mike.

"And – er – me as well," said Abigail.

"And me!" exclaimed Leo and Madeline at the same time.

"Yeah, me too," admitted a smiling again Dutch.

It wasn't too long before they had some idea of what had gone on, and what was still going on. Josh Beecham had disappeared, and to make matters worse, four members of the WSS had called round asking for him. The official reason given, apparently, was that Josh had been taken away to help them with their enquiries. The children, as sad as they were for both Aunt Hattie and Josh, couldn't pretend it overly concerned them, it didn't. Not yet.

For the first time since Monday, Mike wanted to be on his own. It wasn't anything sinister. He hadn't fallen out with any of his new friends or anything like it, but he did want to just sit and rest and think, and maybe write a letter to his mum and dad. He was pleasantly surprised to find that the others had much the same thoughts. So, after tea together which was wolfed down as they had missed lunch, they all went back to their own abodes.

Mike was lying on his bed thinking how his life had changed. He liked it at Hemlock Hall, but he still did miss his home, his parents, and of course his beloved Bedazzlers. . .

Mike was so comfortable and warm that he couldn't help but doze off. He awoke three hours later feeling completely refreshed, and with the promise to write home still fresh in his mind, duly fetched a notepad, pen and envelope.

In his letter, Mike mainly covered the things that had been overlooked

while watching England win the World Cup. He told his parents that he had settled in well, had made good friends, and that all of the staff were great. He did not mention that Professor Cornstone was an ogre, because he didn't like the idea of a confrontation between his parents and anyone from the school, even if it looked like he was going to suffer for seven years at the hands of the Mad Professor.

Mike couldn't think of anything more to add, apart from his love. He signed the letter, put a few xxx's on, nearly sealed it – and smiled. Mike then added a post script:

'PS. We've been asked by our English teacher, who was that miserable bloke in 'A Christmas Carol'? I've forgotten the answer, and for some reason no-one else knows. Please write soon and tell me.'

Mike finally sealed the envelope and went off to ask around as to how letters were posted from the school. He was half expecting to have to go over to the post office, but it turned out that the school had its own post box with a collection every three minutes, Sunday's included.

Mike posted his letter in the box by the main entrance; this was just as the postman walked in. Mike was certain it was none other than Danny Strefford, his own postman from home, but when Leo, and even Dutch mentioned sometime later that he looked like their postman, he gave up trying to work out what was what.

Mike then took himself off to the bathroom, had a nice long bath instead of a shower, and decided to go visiting. He knew that neither himself, Leo, nor Dutch would be allowed in the girls' rooms, and of course, vice versa, but decided he would still call and see what they were all up to.

Mike knocked on the door of Camelot, and a very bored Leo had his shoes back on and was out before the last echo of the huge doorknocker had died away. It was the same with Dutch, and very soon all three were busy looking for the girls' homes.

There was no answer from Longleat. The amusing thing here is that the door knocker didn't knock, it roared like a lion.

They eventually reached Buckingham Palace, knocked, and the door was opened, not by Madeline but a sixth former called Jasmine. She invited the boys in and shouted through, "You've got company. It's the boys."

"OK!" came the reply.

The boys stood there very hesitant.

"Very noble, boys, very noble, but you are allowed in when chaperoned by at least a seventeen year old – which I am – so don't stand there like wallies – step right in."

They all walked in and were immediately jealous. Universal equality had not yet found its way into the magic community. The girls' homes were larger, had more and better quality furniture, en suite bathrooms, and the décor was far more lavish than any of the boys' residences.

"Wow!" said Dutch. "You lucky so and so!"

"Yeah, wish ours was like this," enthused the envious Mike.

"Reminds me of my sister's bedroom," added Leo.

"Cool, isn't it!" teased Madeline – and Abigail – who had been there for some time.

The Magnificent Five, with Jasmine acting as chaperon, sat down on plush leather armchairs and drank tea and coffee from the best china. This was courtesy of even more extras in the girls' homes.

Jasmine was one of Madeline's neighbours who had just called in to see how she had settled in. Jasmine's abode was Caernarvon Castle.

Mike, initially thinking they would end up in the common room or out enjoying an evening wander around the village – if that was allowed, now hoped this would not be the case. He slanked back rather lazily in his chair, ready to enjoy the classic night in, but moments later Madeline finally finished combing her hair.

"Everyone ready, then?" she asked the others.

There were three yeses, which did not include Mike.

"Ready? What do you mean? What's going on?" asked Mike.

"EMPIRES!" came the resounding four-fold retort.

"Your notes, boy! Your notes!" mocked Dutch, doing an atrocious impression of Professor Creek.

Mike blushed but smiled as he was whacked on the head by Dutch, brandishing his rolled up bundle of notes as if it was a football programme.

The five friends made their way out of Buckingham Palace, out of the main building, and over to the Arena.

9

Empires

ALL OF THE NEW FIRST YEARS were marshalled to the tables positioned around the upper stands. The rest of the school filled up the lower terraces; these were standing room only.

It was late at night and the whole Arena was floodlit as it used to be during evening football matches.

Found on all of the tables for use by the first year students, were hats, scarves and a banner to hold between them in the colours of their house motifs. As it was a little chilly, most of the new starters quickly put on their hats and wrapped the scarves around themselves.

The noise was incredible as the whole school cheered for their houses. Many waved their scarves and held their banners aloft.

"Hey, Mike, you look like Rupert the Bear!" mocked Leo.

"Ah, shut it, Raggedy." Leo looked nothing like the impish twig creature, but it was all Mike could think of by way of a rejoinder. "I hope this is worth it, I'm done in."

Mike was a little peeved that this was, technically at least, still a lesson, and that their attendance was not a matter of choice. These sentiments were echoed by Leo and Dutch.

"If you three had used your noddles, you would have realised that the rest of the school is here because they want to be – not because they have to be," said Madeline.

"True enough," said Mike. Leo nodded in agreement, but Dutch just grunted and said something like "egghead" under his breath.

Their minor musings were interrupted by the voice of Professor Winch, echoing around the whole of the upper stands.

"Welcome, my friends, welcome to your very first game of Empires – please make yourself comfortable. I know it's a little chilly, but I assure you that you will soon warm up once the game is underway. I won't keep you long, but you will enjoy the game better if you at least understand the basics before the dragon-roar – or kick off to you, Mike. (Mike blushed, his friends laughed, and Dutch once again hit him on the head with his improvised match programme).

"The game of Empires is – nowadays, I am glad to say – just a game – or perhaps a sport to give it its due dignity. There are no countries to enslave nor treasures to rob, but despite this, the game gives you all either as players or supporters, an opportunity to show great pride and passion for your house, and ultimately for the school. We may not gain or lose real empires, but believe me when I tell you that just as much jubilance is seen

and felt, tears shed and sorrow expressed over the result of a game of Empires, as by the great armies of old, with their freedom or perhaps even their very lives at stake.

"Before the teams come out into the Arena, let me explain the game as played nowadays.

"Firstly, there are four school houses so there are four teams – each consisting of ten players, and as Empires is not what you could call a gentile sport, each team is allowed to make seven substitutions.

"The first thing you will notice are their striking uniforms, or even national costumes, you will soon realise it would be a great injustice to simply call them sports kits. For the purposes of the game and to act as a constant reminder of the game's rich history and heritage, each house – at the beginning of each school year – is allotted a famous empire from history. The house team then becomes that empire for the whole of the season and will don a variety of costumes and apparel most closely associated with it.

"So – for the game itself. . .

"As in Arthur's time – and not forgetting the sly Prince Zanzibar – the object is partly, and only partly, to be the ones still left in the air after all others have been vanquished, but there are important differences. Obviously it is not everyone for themselves – it is every *team* for *itself*.

"Although we do indeed have a glorious mudbath waiting for those unfortunates who are knocked off their broomsticks, they still rejoin the fray as slaves to the team which knocked them down, and they then fight on for their new masters. One-hundred points are awarded for each knockdown. A slave – however – gets fifty points for his original team, and fifty to his or her new masters for each knockdown they make.

"Here is where it gets interesting: in order to discourage slaves from refusing to fight their own original team, they will not know which team is which, because – while they are slaves – everyone apart from their new masters will look the same to them. 'Aha!' I hear you say! 'What if they don't fight at all or turn on their masters?' Here is where the magic world has to bow to the practicality of our non-magic sporting friends.

"Just as there is in football, rugby, and many other sports and games, there is a referee who will keep an eye on things. When such a transgression has been spotted, he or she will award a hundred points to every other team and dock a hundred points from the slaves' own original team, for even just one refusing to fight – every twenty seconds. It's hardly worth the risk, is it?

"There is also the incredibly severe penalty of a thousand points deducted from the offender's original team for each incident of a slave attacking one or more of his or her new masters. These points are then added to the other teams' tallies, and I don't mean between them – it is a thousand points each. Again, it hardly seems worth the risk, but there have been many rather stupid players over the years who have tried all of these ruses, and no doubt there will be many more. However, I digress. . .

"Should an entire team be made slaves, then the slaves they had are free

again to rejoin or reform their original team. One irony worth noting here: a slave can be duly restored to his or her team through being knocked down by his or her own fellows. This happens very frequently indeed, but as slaves can have many different masters in a very short space of time, it is almost impossible to identify each and every occurrence of this oddity.

"The game itself is in two halves of thirty minutes a half, sixty minutes in total, most of the time. The winners of each game are awarded a further three-hundred points, but there are several ways in which the game can finish before this.

"Firstly, if one team manages to make slaves of all other teams – the game is at an end as it would have been in the days of old, with five-hundred bonus points being awarded to the winning team. This is on top of the points already accrued in knockdowns and miscellaneous awards, as well as the points for winning.

"Also, the game is over in the event of any one or more teams having to leave the field before the final dragon-roar. This rule is set in stone, literally, at Hampton Court. And I quote: – *'The game be at an end if one or more teams honour ye not the shifting sands'*. This rule was introduced in the Middle Ages when each royal house wanted the others right where they could see them at all times. If, for some reason, although disregarding enslavement, any one team cannot field at least eight players at any one time, the game is brought to a close. This may be because of more than two being sent off, or through too many injuries and not enough substitutes, but you will be glad to hear that this does not happen – much.

"The game of Empires as played here, is organised as a league – forty games in all to be played throughout the school year. It is the team with the most points at the end of the season which wins not only the Empires Shield, but the winning team are all taken on a holiday of a lifetime. 'Is that it' – I hear you ask? No – not quite, there is the little matter of alliances to explain.

"Before each game – or even at half-time – a maximum of two teams are allowed to form an alliance, if they so wish. The captains of each team wishing to do this have to approach the referee and inform him or her of such a proposal, either before the game or during the half-time interval. Most of the time this is readily agreed to. An alliance has to last at least the full thirty minutes of the half. All alliances are of course considered over by full time, but if one or both captains wish it, they can end any first half alliances at half-time, again by informing each other as well as the referee.

"However, captains should think very carefully before forming an alliance. The points for each team are shared between them – earning each team in the alliance just fifty points each for each knockdown. Just in case any of you are wondering, the alliance is a combined fighting force, yes, but the points are still awarded separately to each participating team.

"Undeclared alliances are illegal. If the referee deems that any two teams, or even three – are acting in unison without prior declaration, the remaining team or teams are awarded five-hundred points with the same amount

docked from the offending teams' totals. You will soon find that this is one of the most controversial aspects of the game, with many teams fined for such a ploy strongly protesting their innocence, but we use Magivision to show replays when an appeal is lodged.

"As for fouls – please remember it is a contact sport so each and every game is rough, that is the nature of the game. However, the following moves are illegal: you cannot deliberately hit anyone in the face lengthways with the jousting stick, such an attack will result in the even more severe penalty of two-thousand points docked from the offender's team, and the same amount will be awarded to the victim's team. In addition to this, the offender will be sent off and banned for five games at least. Your jousting stick is your only weapon – so any kicking, punching or any form of attack other than with the jousting stick – is illegal, and will attract various deductions and awards and punishments determined by the referee – depending on their severity.

"One final important point: once commenced the game will usually not stop until the half or full time dragon-roar. Points will be awarded and deducted – players reprimanded or even sent off – but the game will continue. Only in the event of a genuine emergency will the game be halted . . . right – I think I've said enough. Let the game begin! Well – almost. . . "

The noise from the spectators reached an ear-splitting crescendo as the voice of an unseen emcee hailed the entrance of the different teams in turn.

"Lords, ladies and gentlemen! Please welcome the Camelot House team! This year, Camelot are, surprise surprise, playing for the pride of – wait for it! – The British Empire!"

A tumultuous reception was given to the Camelot team as they flew low from the central tunnel and out onto the Arena. Mike Miller, his friends, and the whole of the new Camelot students soon got into the swing of things – standing, cheering, clapping, whooping and whistling. Just as loud were the hearty boos from the students of other houses, including the new starters not in Camelot.

As Mike looked across, he noticed that the Camelot team were all dressed in the famous red tunics and tall white helmets of the British Army in Victorian times. Or more relevant to Mike, as he had seen them in the film, *'Zulu'*. Their jousting sticks were magically charmed to make them look like the famed Martini-Henry rifles of that era. The team commenced to fly slowly right around the Arena. This was at the same time as the song *'Men of Harlech'* – a stirring song of valour sung in the face of death, adopted by Welsh regiments in the late 1800s – rang around the stadium. The noise of the crowd became even louder.

The team flew on, returning the cheers with smiles and waves while stoically taking the boos on the chin. The emcee boomed out again.

"And how about a big hand for last year's winners?! Lords, ladies and gentlemen, I give you – the Equinox House team! This year, they are proud to wear the famed tunics and sandals of – the Roman Empire!"

Again loud cheers burst forth, interspersed with many boos from three quarters of the crowd, which included Mike and company.

The Equinox team – in their workmanlike Roman tunics and helmets – commenced their lap of honour, but it was really a lap of welcome for the benefit of the first years. Their jousters were made to look like spears which they brandished rather angrily at most of the crowd, and most of the team alternated this with grasping them with both hands and holding them straight out while flying no-handed, just to show that they could. The music changed to the famous background music from a famous episode of *'Star Trek'* – the one where Captain Kirk was forced into becoming a gladiator. Professor Winch and his staff knew it was not that appropriate, but until someone came up with anything better, which was unlikely, then it stayed, but everyone had to admit, the so familiar 'Daa Daa Daa Daa! Doo doo dee doo doo!' was stirring stuff.

"Next up! Amulet House! Give a big hand as they take up the mantle of – the Russian Empire! Watch out, folks! The Cossacks are coming!" boomed the emcee.

The ten that made up the Amulet team played to the crowd with their faces like thunder, and stood tall and proud in their white fur tunics and hats. The only thing not quite right was that most people associate the warring Cossacks as using rudimentary pistols which fired lead shot. However, for the purposes of at least a little continuity, their jousters were made to look much the same as the spears held by their Roman opponents. Again, there were great cheers from their own house, and it has to be said, just as many from elsewhere for their playing to the gallery. The famous Russian folk ballad *'The Volga Boat-men'* echoed around the Arena, but as ever with this haunting song, the copious stanzas of this epic were ignored in favour of its Anglicised chorus, 'Yo Ho Heave Ho! Na Na Na Na! Yo Ho Heave Ho!' This was so catchy it was taken up by most of the crowd, and even Professor Winch and many of his staff.

"And last, but not least, ladies and gentlemen – please give a big welcome to — Solstice House! – who this year are playing for the pride of Iberia! The Spanish Empire!"

Like the Amulet House team, the ten from Solstice played to the gallery and were even more pompous and arrogant – wearing faces more akin to those dancing a tango. Their signature tune was none other than '*Hernando's Hideaway*' – the famed tangoid melody which was belted out with great gusto by about half of the crowd.

The Conquistadors, in their stylish feathery chain-mail and wearing a variety of coal scuttle shaped cabasset and burgonet helmets, brandished a variety of swords, lances and pikes rather threateningly at the crowd. Complementing this extremely snooty display were both the greatest cheers and the loudest boos heard so far.

"And there we are, folks! Each team are in a corner of the Arena waiting for the off! The only thing now is to wait for the dragon-roar! – Yes, there it is!

The first Empires match of the season – IS UNDERWAY!"

All of the other new starters stood and watched in awe at this amazing spectacle.

To huge roars from the whole of the school, each team whooshed into the fray, each with their own battle tactics. The trouble here is that such tactics are not effective for very long – because very quickly the contest becomes a battleground of sheer frenetic bedlam.

Camelot decided on an initial dive bombing strategy. The team flew up high, way above the Arena. They stopped, lined up in two rows of five, and at the captain's signal steamed right down into the fray. It was hoped that the ten different jousting sticks held in a variety of positions, would strike bodies, bash heads, steam roller through and hopefully give the team an early advantage – and a lorry-load full of points.

Solstice went for a no-nonsense, straight into 'em, jousters held straight across approach. They were hoping that sheer guts and determination would eliminate many of the others quickly, and send them down for an early mud bath before becoming their slaves.

In an attempt to stay away from the peloton of chaos, Equinox rather cockily adopted a sniping strategy. If it worked, this would allow them to pin-point and swoop on their targets, while at the same time hoping to avoid being penalised for not fighting.

Amulet House stunned the whole of the Arena after adopting a strategy that their captain had read about in '*The Deadly Game*', which was an account of the most famous battles from the days of the mysterious and wealthy Zanzibar. They decided to break up and take up positions right around the side of the Arena, but unlike Equinox they were not about to become snipers. Instead they approached the fray while doing an amazing series of high-speed airborne cartwheels and somersaults at crazy angles. This was to confuse the other teams who would not be able to mount a suitable defence – supposedly.

Within seconds of the dragon-roar, all four teams were at each other – forty players in all – engaged in deadly battle. Broomsticks whooshed to and fro, jousters were thrust and lunged and even waved. Some players seemed to concentrate on one opponent, while others just lashed out at random at everyone and everything that moved.

One thing not mentioned by Professor Winch was that a frequent hazard was the accidental dislodging of a teammate. Such unfortunate occurrences saw the points split equally between the other teams.

In the early encounters, Amulet House came off worst. Their hopefully spectacular opening gambit of deadly aerobatics actually failed – miserably, with four of the team sent spiralling down into the mud by a combination of the ruthless and highly efficient blitzkrieg from Solstice and the hopefully unseen illegal sniping tactics of Equinox. However, if we replace the words 'hopefully unseen' with 'unfortunately spotted by the referee', then it can be no surprise to find that Equinox were to rue this gamble, as their current

total was now minus three-hundred points.

Hanging down from the rooftop of the stand at the north end of the Arena was a rather quaint looking electronic scoreboard. Despite its age it was still perfectly serviceable, and was flashing up the rapidly changing points totals for all of the teams.

The scoreboard had been thankfully salvaged for posterity from the real Wembley Empire Stadium, upon the demolition of the famed arena. Professor Winch had no qualms whatsoever about utilising ordinary energy sources, as long as the object in question did what was required of it. 'If it works, it works,' was his oft retort to more than a few puerists who worked at or had visited the school.

The Equinox captain – a Jamaican by the name of Christian De La Fonte – whooshed down to the ground and flung a handful of mud into the fray in anger. This was after looking up and seeing the penalties awarded against his team.

Camelot's dive bombing simply saw them safely through the initial imbroglio. They neither scored nor lost points or teammates.

After only a few minutes, Solstice House were in the lead with three-hundred and ninety points and three slaves. Next came Camelot with a highly uninspired zero, and these were followed by Equinox on minus ten. Unfortunately last and very least, were Amulet. Their sad total was minus three-hundred and ten points. The omission by Professor Winch of an explanation of the minus mark scenario had actually been deliberate, but it was soon to become clear why – it didn't last long.

After eighteen minutes Amulet were in the lead, just, with two-thousand seven-hundred and ten points and four slaves. Camelot were right behind on two-thousand five-hundred and seventy-five points, and two slaves.

With Amulet set firmly in their sights, Tom Carpenter and his team suddenly went into over-drive, dislodging eighteen riders in just a matter of seconds. This was followed by a complex series of gains and losses. At one point the whole team had been sent down into the mud but they recovered slowly and fought on.

At the twenty-five minute mark Camelot had managed to amass three-thousand and ninety-five points, but rather frustratingly were still just over a hundred points behind Amulet.

Once his team had again been fully restored, the Camelot captain, none other than the prefect Tom Carpenter – decided to gamble to gain the lead. He whooshed around, was almost dislodged, but soon had the whole team in a huddle, slightly away from the ensuing carnage.

With hasty glances at the scoreboard, Tom frantically explained his new plan, which, if successful, would soon see points piling up. The penalties currently being incurred, one-hundred and fifty so far, would not matter a jot. The whole team turned, and one by one flew back into the action in single file.

Tom, the first in line, soared high up into the sky; seconds later the second

in line took his broomstick into a nosedive.

The up-down pattern was then repeated throughout the whole team.

As Tom swooped down to smite an opponent, this was immediately spotted by the other teams, but as they went to fight off the attack, the second in line soared back up to stop them in their tracks, who in turn was backed up by the one behind, again swooping down from on high.

Once all had successfully run the gauntlet, Tom Carpenter flew back and started the manoeuvre off again. It was indeed a spectacular success.

However, as is always the case, such manoeuvres cannot be effectively sustained for very long, but on this occasion fortune did indeed favour the brave. Just as the manoeuvre was running out of steam, the half-time dragon-roar boomed around the Arena. Camelot were in the lead with four-thousand four-hundred and eighty points, their whole team intact and with nine slaves. Their nearest rivals, Equinox, were on four-thousand points exactly, followed by Amulet on three-thousand seven-hundred and sixty. Last but not least were Solstice House, with a creditable three-thousand three-hundred and twenty-five points.

Similar to football games, the second half interval was fifteen minutes.

Mike slumped back in his seat, exhausted. He had also given himself a very sore throat from all the shouting, cheering and even much booing, but his friends were just as bad.

"Blinkin' 'eck! And I said there's no other game which can equal footy! This is fantastic!" enthused Mike.

"Yeah, I'm not sure if I can ever go to watch City ever again after this," agreed Leo.

"I wouldn't go that far," said the stoically loyal Mike Miller, thinking not only of his fellow Bedazzlers but of his local semi-professional team, Barnswick Town. But there wasn't that much conviction in his voice.

"It's all right," said Madeline, with a very hoarse voice.

"Yeah, that's why you kept quiet the whole half!" joshed Dutch.

"I didn't like those show offs from Solstice, that's all," lied Madeline, but with a grin.

"I like it. I hope I get to play it while I'm here," said Abigail, once again in I want to be noticed mode.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I bash you with my jouster? I won't hurt you, 'onest," teased Dutch in a high pitched voice.

Abigail smiled, blushed, and said, "Oy, you, I don't speak like that!" and hit him on the arm.

"Only kiddin', Abbers," said Dutch, with his friendly smile.

Although none realised it then, at that very moment, Abigail Trent gained the lifetime's nickname of Abbers, but she didn't seem to mind.

As the five chatted away about what they had just witnessed, as well as a whole host of other things to do with both school and home – waiters and waitresses appeared with snacks and drinks. Very soon the table was piled high with burgers, crisps, ice creams, and large tumblers of lemonade.

"Not eating?" said Leo to the others.

The last of the food and drink was quickly consumed or discarded as they heard the dragon-roar signalling the start of the second half. What took all of the new starters by surprise was that there only seemed to be three teams emerging from their half-time team talks. Camelot were there, so were Equinox – but they couldn't quite make out the third team. They looked a little like Solstice – still with their curved coal scuttle helmets – but also a little like Amulet House with their white tunics so reminiscent of the famed Cossacks.

"It's an alliance!" suddenly shouted Madeline, who doesn't think that much of the game.

The friends all stood and strained their necks to get a closer look. They realised Madeline was right. The third and last team emerging from the tunnel were not only kitted out in a combination of costumes, but there were twenty of them.

"Doesn't look good for us, does it?" commented a pessimistic Leo.

"Cissies, mate, cissies. Can't take the heat so they've ganged up," said Dutch.

"I hope you're right, but they don't look like cissies to me," said a rueful Mike, as at least seven of the twenty reminded him of the near-neanderthal Donaldo back home. He didn't want to be unkind so left a further thought in his mind – eight of the alliance were girls, but even three of these reminded him of Donaldo – on a bad day.

The worried look on Tom Carpenter's face did not go unnoticed by any of the students as Tom flew by.

"Poor lad," said Abigail, more to herself, but she had been heard.

"Yeah, knit him a cardy and send him a lollypop," added Dutch.

Abigail didn't bother replying to this as she knew she wouldn't have been heard.

The roar was tremendous as the new Solstice/Amulet alliance flexed their combined muscles, brandished their twenty-strong jousters, and began to tear into the others.

The action was so crazy that it was difficult to tell which teams were which, especially as most of the forty players had free-fallen into the mud at least once during the first half.

Shortly after first becoming Headmaster, Professor Winch had attended his first game of Empires at the Arena. After just a few minutes of play, the professor was horrified to find that all four teams, all forty players and all forty (expensive) costumes, had all become totally and utterly indistinguishable from one another. This was due to each and every player now being covered from head to foot in thick black mud.

The kindly but rather naive professor decided to lend a hand. With one swish of his wand the mud-spattered costumes were returned to a state of shop-bought sparkling cleanliness in an instant. Unfortunately for the still green behind the ears Professor Winch, this was met with loud, angry

demands for him to 'Stop his flippin' meddling' – or words to that effect, by just about everyone else in the school.

The professor blushed, sighed, smiled, and swished his wand once more. All four teams once again looked like prime candidates to star in the before part of a washing powder advert.

The frenetic pace continued unabated. Every second someone seemed to fall into the mud.

The fallen re-emerged black and slimy (or even more so), and zoomed back into the fray, spattering anyone in their way with huge globules of black bilge which flew off them as they whooshed along.

The noise was at such thunderous levels and the action was at such high-speed, it was not always possible to tell what was happening exactly nor to discern who were the foulers, the foulees, or whom was getting fined what. Even the scoreboard offered no real clues, as the points were added and deducted so fast it was impossible to keep track. However, one almighty transgression was indeed noticed. After being shocked (and stunned) into a few moments of silence, there followed ear-splittingly loud howls of outrage from all of the crowd, as well as all of the staff. It was so bad it was enough to stop play.

"I'll 'ave you, Casper! And you, Lemon! Just you wait until the next lesson!" yelled and threatened the senior combined sciences teacher and Equinox House Master, Professor Edwin Cornstone.

It was upon witnessing a callous assault by two particularly large brutes of the alliance upon a somewhat younger and slightly built Equinox player, which had resulted in not only the very vocal condemnation which had echoed all around the stadium, but had caused the outraged professor to issue such dire threats from the staff box. The two thugs had sandwiched the terrified young player and then forced her into a solid brick wall to the side of the main stand.

The two thugs in question were Colm Casper – from Ireland, (and from Solstice), and the formidable Honey Lemon, an Amulet girl – six feet four inches and as hard as nails.

The two bullies were, of course, immediately sent off.

The grim-faced head left the Arena at the same time as both Casper and Lemon were leaving the pitch. The two were unrepentant, blowing raspberries and making other rude gestures to the crowd. The pair gave one last 'Harvey Smith' to the entire stadium before strutting away down the tunnel for an early bath.

Poor Eleanor Warren: four feet nothing, thin as a rake and in her first game of Empires. She mumbled 'I want my mum' as she was levitated away on a stretcher.

After a brief nod from the ref' over towards the departing (and angry) headmaster, the game was restarted.

Mike was absolutely horrified, as were the whole school, but what most of the students did not know was that both Casper and Lemon had been on

their last warning. This was not just over their conduct in the game of Empires, but in everything.

Most warnings of this nature usually expire at the end of the school year, but for these two thugs the warning in force from the previous school year had had to be carried over. The Head and his staff had hoped against hope that the summer break would have somehow helped in improving their behaviour, but it was now patently obvious that this had not been the case.

Casper and Lemon were not only sent off but were sent home, for good, and with charges of assault waiting for them. Detective Inspector George Winch of Scotland Yard would personally see to it, aided by Constable Jim Creek.

Tom Carpenter was very worried indeed as Camelot suddenly lost the lead to Equinox. Solstice were just a few points behind the top two, but sadly, their partners for the second half had only managed to accrue three-hundred and ninety points. Amulet's slipping out of contention was due to not only the various losses and minor penalties they had incurred on their own account, but worse still by the massive penalty applied jointly and severally to both teams of the alliance.

Tom once again gambled for victory. He led his team away from the melee and once again barked out a new ploy. He managed to do this with only a hundred point penalty for not fighting.

With a nod from their captain, Camelot formed a circle with their jousters all pointing straight out. At the skipper's command the whole circle span right into the centre of the battle. He had also ordered all of the team to spin faster than they had ever done before, both individually and with a secondary force employed to make the circle itself rotate and move along at speed. This was to be their mode of attack.

If his earlier ploy was absolutely brilliant, then the dictionary has no words for this; the results even staggered Tom himself.

Within one minute of these swirling dervishes making their circular assault, every other player of every other team had been swept off their broomsticks and had become slaves to their Camelot masters.

Such besom-powered totality had not been seen for many a year.

A huge dragon-roar signalled the end of the game. Camelot had won – and how.

Although on many, many occasions, the points tallies for one or more of the teams at the final dragon-roar are lower (and sometimes considerably so), than the scores achieved while the game is in progress, this was not the case today for either Camelot or Equinox. Camelot won the match with a final tally of six-thousand one-hundred and ten points, followed by Equinox on five-thousand two-hundred and forty.

As for the disgraced alliance teams, they had been hoping to still weigh in with something like a respectable score but instead were to suffer a further disappointment. Their points tallies were actually reduced to zero. This was upon the referee being over-ruled by the still incensed Professor Winch, who,

as supremo of the school, had exercised a rarely used privilege to make an example of both teams by taking such a draconian measure. Whether concerning Empires at the Arena, or relating to things more academic within the school itself, the maxim of one for all is applied equally to the shame as it is to the glory.

The five friends, cockahoop at seeing their team win handsomely in their first ever Empires game, linked each other and sang all the way back to the common room.

But tired eleven year olds with hoarse voices do not make good party animals. Within twenty minutes they were all yawning and had said their goodnights.

A whoozy Mike was awoken very early the next morning by the clattering of the letter box. It was a reply from his mum and dad.

'Dear Mike,

We're both glad you've settled down OK, and
that you are happy. Now, 'A Christmas Carol'.
We're both shocked! What have your dad and I always
Called your mean old Uncle Lenny? Hubcap, of course!
And what did your poor old grandad, God rest his soul,
used to say? No-oneplayed old Gerry Hubcap better than
Alastair Sim. Remember?
Anyway, I hope you win, if it's a quiz that is.

See you soon.

Love, Mum (and Dad) xxxxx.

PS. Wasn't the World Cup Final great?!
Oh, PPS. One piece of bad news, your dad is absolutely livid.
Someone has stolen one of the scrooges off the car.'

10

Knuckling Down

SUNDAY MORNING was yet another lie-in for the five, but when they eventually met up in the common room the whole of the house seemed to be in somewhat of a rush.

"What's going on?" asked Mike, as Tom Carpenter rushed past.

"What's going on?! WHAT'S GOING ON?!" replied a seemingly insulted (and demented) Tom. "Empires! That's what's going on! Aren't you coming to watch?"

"Again? Now?" exclaimed Mike.

"Again! – Now! . . . Sorry, should have said. The first game is just an exhibition – no league points are up for grabs, although I believe the results of exhibition games are recorded somewhere. The real games are played on Sundays and then on Wednesday evenings. You are all – er – coming to watch, aren't you?"

"Too right we are!" exclaimed Leo. "We are, aren't we?" he repeated, looking around at his friends, but he needn't have worried. They were soon up and following the crowd, ready for another sixty minutes of besomistic bedlam.

As Mike hurried along with the others, he mused on the game he had witnessed the previous evening. Although officially just a curtain-raiser, Mike knew that in the minds of all the players and their supporters, there simply was no such thing as an exhibition match or a friendly – not when it came to Empires. Mike smiled to himself, and concluded that this was precisely how things should be. He then joined in with the spirited banter between the students of the various houses (thus supporters of their house teams), as they all sauntered along to the Arena.

With a range of manoeuvres that worked superbly from the off, Tom Carpenter's Camelot thrashed the other teams out of sight.

The Camelot team so very nearly repeated the feat of the previous evening, but just as it seemed they were to knock the last surviving opponent down and bring an early end to the game, Tom himself became a living mud-pie. This was when a Solstice player, in fact the last opponent still flying, suddenly upended his own broom and shot up high into the sky. This rather cavalier (and lonely) chappy then took his broomstick into a nose dive, zeroed in on Tom and repeatedly pogo-sticked him on his head. After taking such a relentless pounding, the Camelot skipper eventually became so dazed he didn't know what was happening. Almost unconscious, Tom slid off his broomstick and plummeted to the ground. However, the pogoing maniac from Solstice was very soon repaid in full as he too found himself enjoying

an early mud-bath. This was after the rest of the Camelot team had come to avenge their glorious leader and had steamed right into him, and everyone else. As for their skipper, he was in no danger at all, not even when submerged deep in the magically oxygenated mud. Seconds later, a slimy blackened Tom re-emerged and shot straight back up into the air to rejoin his loyal troops.

The demented acolyte of the late Sir Hugo, whose tactics he had employed against Tom Carpenter after getting tips from that venerable tome, *'The Deadly Game'*, was of course heavily censured. Unfortunately for his teammates, it naturally followed that the entire team was severely penalised, but Camelot didn't even need the extra points as they were so far ahead.

The dragon roared. Camelot had won – again. And this time it counted.

Tom and his cockahoop comrades were nestling nicely in first place in the Empires League, twelve-hundred points clear of Equinox in second place.

Sunday evening was another night laughing and joking in the common room, but with Monday beckoning, another early night seemed like a good idea.

*

As the weeks rolled by, all of the lessons became more difficult as had been promised, but all of the Magnificent Five were at least up to the minimum standard required, with three of them well above it.

Overall, Madeline and Abigail were doing really well, with Mike not that far behind. Although Dutch and Leo struggled more than the others, they did work hard and were hovering between average and good in most subjects. There is, however, always one subject at least that even a brilliant student is not brilliant at or is perhaps even atrocious. For Mike this was outdoor sciences as taught by Professor Cornstone. Despite the mad professor giving everyone who crossed his path a hard time, there was now a general concensus among his close friends that he did indeed seem to reserve most of his venom for Mike. It was this more than anything which made Mike a nervous wreck whenever it was time for lessons at the allotments.

However, Mike wasn't so bad at ordinary science in the labs', but he put this down to these lessons being taken more by other teachers, rather than the dreaded professor himself.

In broomsticks skills, all of the first years were still attached to a cable but with the crane now sited right in the middle of the pitch. The centrifugal force employed supplied a greater width and speed than they had experienced so far, but it wasn't long before even the slowest and most reluctant learner was able to do at least a full circuit without feeling they were going to fall off.

As for their pyromaniacal music teacher – the spirited octogenarian didn't set fire to anyone – not even Dutch. The class were taught how to use the different pedals, buttons and levers in conjunction with all of the bikes ridden by different children, at the different speeds specified. They were well on their way to their presentation of *'The Magic Flute'*, although some of the

children were still embarrassed to see a whole host of themselves indulging in Singspiel, playing classical music and even conducting the whole affair.

Cauldron and wand skills lessons were very hard work indeed, but their magic skills were keenly honed through the fine tutelage of Miss Llefevre.

Geography was hard, too, particularly with it being both human and physical geography. Mike, his friends, as well as most of the class, felt as if their brains were being addled as they moved rapidly on from studying scree samples from the Welsh Cambrians, to discussing the historical sparcity of the GNP of Upper Volta.

English became at least a little more serious. Mr Titherley rushed them through traditional grammar, but the children were not certain as to whether this was to keep them up or even ahead of the curriculum, or to make time for more jolly jests of a magical literary persuasion.

History was half and half in Mike's mind. Some lessons would be a mind-numbing reading up of things such as the history of suspicion and disbelief between both the magic and ordinary worlds, but in others he would clatter down the stone staircase with the rest of the class so as to witness a magical moment from world history. Mike's favourite lesson so far had been when he had found himself cheering along with the crowd outside Buckingham Palace, the real one. This was as the old king and queen greeted the ecstatic throngs celebrating the end of the Second World War.

Government and citizenship was an even worse ordeal, and, thought Mike, was definitely for the drop in the fourth year. In Mike's opinion, the best lesson they had ever had was the very first, with Mr Horatio Mainbrace as the guest speaker. After that, he couldn't keep up with the plethora of Laws, By-Laws, High Courts, Low Courts, Constitutions, Institutions, and so on and so forth.

Maths he excelled at. Despite them becoming increasingly difficult, he loved the living, breathing algebraic problems dreamed up by Miss Fortune, and sometimes deliberately made a mistake to see what effect it would have. Although Miss Fortune always seemed to smile and wink at him when he did.

Just as in all schools, there was a huge sigh of relief when the clock struck 4:00 p.m. each Friday afternoon.

Most weekends for the five were spent either walking around the village or perhaps visiting the farm. On the odd Sunday afternoon they would walk even further out across the fields, and – weather permitting, climb the steep hills which many of the children could see from their castle windows.

When the weather was bad they watched the large Magivision screen in the common room, although as this had to cater for the whole of Camelot House, rows over what to watch were quite frequent.

The first holiday for the children arrived – Christmas. Mike wondered what had happened to half-term, but there was no such thing at Hemlock Hall. Mike really enjoyed his trips home during the holidays, and from Mike's first Christmas break, the Barnswick Bedazzlers never lost another match against Brazil. As an insurance policy, the Bedazzlers decided only ever to play when

Mike was home. He would turn up at the park, his friends would wink at Mike, Mike would wink back, and then the Bedazzlers went on to win handsomely – every time.

Disappointingly, there were no more trips to 10 Downing Street. Mike travelled to and from school by perfectly ordinary chartered coaches – or perhaps almost ordinary – Wimpole's Inter-Community Charabancs – all two of them – driven by two comically mis-employed characters. These were Baz Wimpole and Ricky Marsh, two middle-aged wizards who thought trendy first names and baseball caps would help them fit in to the non-magic world to which they most certainly did not belong. The charabancs, or coaches, simply turned into a country lane and arrived back at either school or home, with all passengers reaching their destination within half an hour, some within a few minutes. One Saturday, an intrigued Mike tried to walk home and tramped along the same winding country lane for eleven hours – before the footsore Mike saw that he was back at school and trudged wearily back to his room.

Straight after Christmas it was work, work, work, although they were compensated with three more Combined Subjects Field Trips – although Iceland was not on the itinerary of any of them.

During the Easter break, Madeline and her family started a tradition which was to be of great benefit to all five friends and their families. Madeline invited them all to her house in Southport. This was a huge, twenty bedroomed mansion by the sea. The others loved it and soon got to know Madeline's extended family, including one more member of the magic community who seemed to come and go at odd times, Estella Grant – or Auntie Ezzie to Madeline.

There were trips to the fair, shopping expeditions along the famed Lord Street Arcade, and meals along the Promenade. There were days out around the area, such as a shopping trip to Liverpool City Centre. There were also a few visits to various suburbs of this great city where they were all welcomed with open arms by more of Madeline's very big, very happy and very generous family. There was also a day out further up the coast to Blackpool – the big and noisy, cheap and cheerful resort town, considered by many who live in the region to be Southport's bigger brother.

This set the trend for every holiday and even many weekends where allowed. The Magnificent Five and their families all stayed with each other as much as they could, with all the parents thankful that their child had found such close, caring friends, and through them had made new friends themselves.

Even Greasy Graham and Sweaty Eric were invited to Madeline's during one holiday. This was on the proviso that no-one blew the gaff as regards the true status of their hosts, or indeed Mike and the rest of his school friends – although Mike traded nose-tappings and knowing smiles with both of the Kentish hillbillies.

The Millers were a little worried on the two lads' behalf, because as nice as

Madeline and her family undoubtedly were, they were – as Dutch likes to say – a bit posh. However, Gwen and Laurie Chalmers took one look at Barnswick's very own sons of the soil, laughed – and hugged them regardless.

*

The first year was nearly over.

'The Magic Flute' was coming along really well, but as Mike still hadn't taken to the idea of watching himself sing opera on stage, he had swapped to just being a bike rider.

The big night finally arrived.

The curtains across the makeshift stage in the Main Hall opened and the magivelocipedal musical began.

In tandem with others from the class, Mike did his bit to keep the show going. Sarah and Dutch pressed levers in a strict order, Holly pressed a variety of buttons, Luke Left turned two huge wheels at different times, while Mike had to pedal at a constant two and a half miles per hour. This was to ensure that the musical replicants of Tobias and Abigail, playing the birdcatcher, Papageno, and his girlfriend, Papagena, completed their duetted fugue in time and in tune.

The grand finale was rather chaotic. It was fortunate that there was a copious amount of water to hand due to Adam Volynchook setting the curtains on fire, but the class soldiered on right to the end and were given a fully-deserved standing ovation by the rest of the school.

The end of year exams duly arrived. Mike's lowest mark was for combined sciences, no surprise there. Professor Cornstone's unexplained dislike of Mike Miller had remained constant all year; although Mike was relieved to find he did get fifty-eight per cent, which would still be a pass in most school exams. His highest mark was for mathematics – ninety-three per cent. A beaming Miss Fortune congratulated Mike after their last lesson of the year; he was top in her class.

Although they did not dwell on it, one major disappointment was that the Camelot Empires team, led of course by Tom Carpenter, had been denied the Empires League Shield. Before the final game of the season, Camelot were in second place in the league – and a win with a margin of more than ninety-five points would have had them overtaking Equinox, the current league leaders – with the other two houses – barring the amassing of a truly colossal points total – simply playing for pride.

With only eleven minutes remaining of this all or nothing seasonal finale, the heavy rain which had made the game very difficult, had worsened and became a storm. A huge bolt of lightning struck Tom Carpenter, and as he happened to be in a huddle with the rest of the team discussing tactics, the whole Camelot team were electrocuted.

As all ten were levitated off to hospital, the referee, after frantically checking the rule book, felt he had no option but to award the game to Solstice. This was after concluding that Camelot had broken Rule 10A:

'Teams are to field at least eight players at all times'. Although they had had seven substitutes available, this was frustratingly one short of the eight needed to continue. It was no use; Tom Carpenter's inspirational leadership all season had come to nothing.

The enforcing of Rule 10B: *'A game of Empires cannot continue with any less than four teams'* – had brought Solstice (in the lead up until the lightning had struck), nothing but a pyrrhic victory and had handed Equinox the Empires League Shield.

The Equinox House Master, Professor Cornstone, shook hands with the Camelot Matron, Miss Llefevre. "Shocking, Daphne, absolutely shocking."

Mike Miller's first year at Hemlock Hall had come and gone. He was getting ready to return home.

*

In the summer holidays the trend that Madeline and her family had started at Easter continued right through the whole of August.

Dutch waited nervously with his parents at Euston Station for around thirty-five people, comprised of his friends and their families. However, he needn't have worried, the friendliness of his visitors and the tremendous hospitality of his own folks and friends of London's East End, made for an enchanting weekend for all. It was so good that all were in tears upon having to leave each other, but this was only until the next weekend when the good folk of Basingstoke did not know what had hit them. Then it was off to Barnswick, then Leicester, and then Southport and Liverpool again.

The highlight of this final jolly of the summer holidays was a massive barbecue and disco on Southport beach. As it was a perfectly ordinary public beach, the parents held back from using magic to light the barbecue. However, five successive fire-bug fathers, after each having boasted that they had the knack to make the damp coals burn, eventually gave it up as a bad job and duly retired with rather blackened faces. While everyone was offering tissues and handkerchiefs to the blackened paters with blackened pates, Madeline's Auntie Ezzie slyly walked up to the barbecue; in seconds it was roaring away.

Although there was sadness as all the children and their families said goodbye – this was not to be for long, at least not for the children. It was time to prepare for their return to Hemlock Hall for their second year. . .

11

Diamonds in the Rough

THE START OF THE SECOND YEAR ARRIVED.

Not even howling wind and rain could dampen spirits as all the new second years rushed back into their dormitories, flung their belongings down and rushed off to all get together with their special groups of special friends.

Similar to Mike's close-knit little gang, Tobias Jordache, Adam Volynchook, Sarah Biddles, Hyacinth Molyneaux, and Luke 'Hee-Haw' Left (a strange young fellow who laughed like a donkey and was always late for everything), had also all become very close friends as the first year had gone by.

It was often a source of amusement to both groups whenever they all approached each other along a narrow path or corridor in their semi-permanent linked formation. With laughter and smiles neither would give way to the other – and duly collided.

On one such occasion there was that much confusion, the reformed groups of friends found Tobias linked in between Madeline and Leo, with Mike twenty yards away in between Sarah and Adam, and asking what was happening that night. Although most of the time it was Mike who had engineered the chaos and was simply hamming it up.

The second year also saw friendships blossoming between the five and some of the Hemlock Village community, especially Harry Gripweed. Old Harry treated the youngsters like family, and many a rainy afternoon was spent with the children sitting on cushions, enthralled about the crazy goings on over the years, especially the capers involving Toke Bottomley. As well as this, Mike unexpectedly became good friends with two other village residents.

*

It was one Saturday morning early in December and Mike found himself the only one from his friends who was not confined to bed with a bad bout of dragon-flu'. He had breakfast, even sat with Tobias and Sarah, but it was not the same. He wolfed down the rest of his bacon and took himself off to the village. As the shops were only just beginning to open up, he walked across the fields and over to Shadowbrooke Farm.

"Moarnin', Mike, where's yer pals?" asked Farmer Harris.

"In bed, flu'," said the forlorn Mike.

"Oh dear, me Mrs is the same – so's me workers. Here – I'se an idea! D'ya fancy givin' a 'and? I'll pay yer, o' course, 'n' yer can have lunch with me, if yer want to."

Mike's eyes lit up.

"Yeah, that'd be great! What do I do, then?"

There was a mischievous twinkle in Bryn Harris's eyes.

"Firs' of all, go and fetch Bezzie for me, he needs his shots."

"Er – Bezzie?" replied a reluctant Mike.

Farmer Harris looked at Mike's white face and burst out laughing.

"Only jokin', young fella, only jokin'! Come wi' me, we's got something ya won't mind doin'."

He took Mike to a little shed and took out a huge sack of feed. "Can you whistle, Mike?"

"Er – yeah," said Mike, wondering what was to happen next.

"'Ere, take this, and whistle a couple o' toimes."

"What – now?" asked Mike.

"Now, boy, now!" replied old Bryn, but still with a twinkle in his eye.

Mike took the sack of feed and whistled. A panicky Mike soon found himself surrounded by every chicken, turkey, duck, goose and even pig from the farm, all jumping up around him wanting to be fed. Although it didn't hurt, the ducks, geese and turkeys began pecking at him. Whether this was to get him to hurry up or whether Mike himself would suffice, wasn't clear to Mike at all.

"Whoooaaa! Help!"

The terrified Mike ran off, but still carrying the sack, which he soon realised had not been the best of ideas as most of the animals had kept up with him. Although it was only coincidence, other birds landed in front of him as if they were blocking his exit.

By this time, Farmer Harris had collapsed onto a bale of hay, holding his sides as he laughed and roared very loudly.

"Bryn Harris! Are you up to your old tricks again?! Let the poor boy be, for Pete's sake!" shouted a deathly pale Mrs Harris from the doorway. "Don't worry, young'un, they's only 'ungry!"

"I guessed that!" replied Mike.

"No no, I mean they wants the grain! Just fling some around the yard, they'll soon leave you alone."

"Oh," said Mike, feeling foolish.

Mike opened the sack and started throwing the feed as far away from himself as he could. Soon all of the hungry birds and pigs were gobbling up every grain.

"Try not to let the pigs have any! It's not for them!" came the hoarse shout from the doorway.

"Er – OK!" shouted back Mike, who had no intention of forcibly preventing pigs from eating what was not rightfully theirs.

Farmer Harris was again upright and puffing on his pipe. He waited for Mike to use up about half of the sack, then tapped his pipe on a trough and put it back in his pocket.

"OK, Mike, that's plenty. Fancy a char?"

"Yes, please," replied Mike.

They went into the farmhouse, which Mike found to be much as he

expected. The lounge was next to the kitchen all in one big long room, with a huge oblong table in the middle with ten chairs placed around it. At the far end were two easy chairs, and to the right was a fireplace.

Mrs Harris had only really come down for a hot drink; she had already retired to bed again to continue fighting off the flu'.

Mike seated himself at the table and Farmer Harris brought over two huge mugs of hot sweet tea.

"It's good to 'ave a young'un around the place again," said the farmer, sitting down opposite Mike.

Mike, not really knowing how to reply to this, opted for the diplomatic wan smile and nodding of his head; but then he had a thought.

"Erm – Farmer Harris, I can't help wondering . . . everything here, seems, well . . . normal. Are you not a wizard, then?"

Old Bryn smiled. He again took out his pipe which he filled as he answered.

"O' course I am, boy! But you 'as a lot to lean, m'boy, a lot to learn. Magic 'elps the world, m' lad, 'elps it! That's all! Jus' cos we're magic folk don' mean animals 'll never go 'ungry! An' they's ain' a magic solution for everything, you know, despite many a young wizard or witch 'avin' their 'eads filled to the contrary by theirs elders who ought to know better."

"Oh, I see," said Mike, who had begun to wonder why the cattle just seemed like cattle, pigs like pigs, and why farm labourers huffed and puffed, when he thought magic would do the work for them.

"I know what you are thinking, young fella, but the thing is, magic powers and abilities ain't inexhaustible, bet you didn't know that, did you?" asked old Bryn, who then lit his pipe with his thumb which had erupted into flame after flicking it against his index finger.

"No, I didn't – not really," replied Mike, who finally had the answer to why farm labourers, even on a magic farm, did indeed huff and puff as they dug, planted and harvested the crops, and pulled, pushed, and dragged many things that breathed – and a fair few things that didn't.

For the next half hour they talked about the farm, the school, Mike's home – and would have gone on to discussing which was better, football or Empires, but they were interrupted by several loud bangs on the door.

"Wha' doarn fool goes roun' knockin' on folks's door like that?!"

Farmer Harris opened up. He just about managed to utter, "Oh – it's you,", when in barged none other than Josh Beecham.

"I'm sorry, Bryn, but can I hide out here again? The peelers are still after me, I don't want Auntie to know I'm back, and I need to get to Krick— oh, hello there, young fella."

"Hello," said an awkward feeling Mike, who thought it best to go. "Er – Farmer Harris, I think I'd better—"

"No need, young fella, my business with Bryn can wait a while," said Josh, sensing Mike's awkwardness. "Tell you what, Bryn, I'm done in. . . the usual OK?"

"Helps yerself," replied old Bryn.

Josh left the farmhouse but through the back door. Farmer Harris turned to Mike.

"You's looks a trustworthy fella. What say you don't mention this to no-one, eh?"

Farmer Harris was lucky. On a previous visit, Mike had seen the old man arguing with Professor Cornstone; anyone who opposed him must be OK.

"No problem at all. I've forgotten him already."

"Who?" asked old Bryn.

"Dunno, I've forgotten," smiled Mike.

"Good lad. Good lad! Now, back to a bit of work, eh?"

Mike smiled and nodded. Farmer Harris was with Mike all the way as they cleaned out the barns, sheds, sties and all the other animal pens. Finally, two aching backs made their way back over to the farmhouse for lunch.

Mike again seated himself at the table while Farmer Harris was in the kitchen rustling up a full English.

"If the Mrs was up and about, we'd 'ave 'ad a grand lunch, but I'm afraid a fry-up is the best old Bryn can manage," said the kindly old Bryn as he brought across two dinner plates piled high with shallow-fried goodies.

"Ivvs uvvy," said the unfortunately greedy Mike, who had already crammed three sizzlers into his mouth.

A little while later, Mike, thinking they were going back to work, waited for Farmer Harris who had disappeared out of the back door for a while. He came back in with something in his hand.

"Here, young fella, I don't expect anyone to work all day Saturday, you've done a grand job."

The old crofter passed Mike a hundred jupiters.

"Thanks!" said Mike, who wasn't expecting anything like it. "But I can stay if you still need help?" he suggested.

"No need, young fella. I'm packing in for now myself. I'm sure one of the lads will be in tomorrow."

"I'll get going then. And thanks very much, I really enjoyed that – and thanks for the money. Bye."

"Bye, young fella, 'n' watch out for Bezzie!" chuckled old Bryn.

"I will!" shouted back Mike, who knew full well that Bezzie was safely tethered in the barn.

As Mike walked over the fields he thought he heard footsteps to the side of him. As it was December the light was already fading, and as it was raining as well, this unnerved Mike a little.

"Psst! Mike!"

"Who's there?!" said a terrified Mike.

"It's only me, it's Josh."

"What are you whispering for? Why are you hiding?" said Mike, as Josh came out of the shadows and walked alongside him.

"Long story, Mike, long story. Can you do me a favour?"

"It depends. What favour?" asked Mike.

"Can you take this key, open the shop, go through to the back and let me in the back way?"

"Why? And anyway, your Aunt Hattie will see me."

"No, she won't, dragon-flu', and a bad dose of it at that."

"How do you know?" said a suspicious Mike, knowing that Josh was on the run and was unlikely to have called in at his home, especially as he was being asked to help him to do so now.

"Bryn told me. And I don't want to be seen on the main road, that's why I need to get in the back way."

"I don't know," replied Mike.

Mike didn't mind forgetting seeing him at the farm, he could reasonably argue that that was nothing to do with him – but possibly helping a known criminal – that was another thing entirely.

"If I said I'll hide while you go and get Professor Winch, would that make you trust me?" asked Josh.

"You could just run off while I'm gone," replied Mike.

"I might at that, but what would you have lost if that happened?" quickly replied Josh.

Mike, not being certain of Josh at all, at least knew that he could indeed go and fetch the professor; what Josh did in the meantime was beyond his powers to influence anyway, but was it a bluff? Was Josh banking on him believing him, even though the professor might – if called – shout for every peeler and possibly the entire WSS upon hearing that a fugitive was hiding out in Hemlock Village? Mike came to a decision – a bluff of his own.

"I'm sorry, Josh, but I think I should fetch the headmaster – just to be sure."

Josh sighed and bowed his head.

"Fair do's, but be as quick as you can, please," said Josh, with desperation in his voice. The tired and gaunt looking mystery man then gave a reluctant nod and took himself off the road to regain the cover of the trees.

Mike had become so familiar with the fields around the village that he was able to walk until he knew he was out of sight. He then doubled back, still unseen, to within a short distance of Josh who was now resting against an oak tree. Mike crouched down behind a small rise, looking down on the troubled shop assistant. He wasn't certain what Josh could or would do to show his sincerity or lack of it, but watching him in secret was all he could think of.

Mike's cloak and dagger surveillance was disturbed by voices which seemed to come from somewhere along the lane. He popped his head up above the rise and looked across to the road. He could see two policemen – presumably of the magic persuasion – walking towards the school. Mike could hear every word of their conversation. So could Josh.

" . . . It was that Cornstone fella again, said he had it on good authority that Beecham was making his way back to Hemlock Village. The Super didn't take any notice at first, but other more reliable sources have said much the

same thing."

"Yeah, well, I'm giving it half an hour and then I'm off for a pint."

"Where shall we try first?"

"The Lonely, eh? Best grog in the whole county."

"Beecham, ya clown! Where shall we look for Beecham?"

"Oh, sorry, Thad, stupid me. How about the sweetshop, eh? Not too bright, I'm led to believe. I heard that he blackmailed the Duke of Magicombe over some smuggled jewellery. Apparently, he sent an anonymous letter which wasn't anonymous at all, signed it, put his full name and address on it – and was arrested six minutes later."

"And I heard that he taunted the Blackpool peelers by telling them that they'll never find him because he had taken the house numbers off the front door."

"Yeah, what happened?"

"The peelers looked for the house with no numbers. He was in jail within four minutes."

Although he knew he shouldn't laugh, Mike had to put his hand over his mouth so his sniggers wouldn't be heard. Josh just ruefully shook his head.

Once the peelers were out of sight, Mike clambered over to Josh.

"You sly rat!" said Josh.

"Shhh, they'll hear us. OK, I believe you, or at least trust you – the trouble is, those two policemen don't, and they are on the way right now to your shop to look for you – but I've an idea. Instead of scarpering, let's just wait here until they've given up and have left the village – then go in. Hopefully they won't come back again later."

"Er . . . yeah, OK," said a mildly miffed Josh, who had had no intention of scarpering; but equally he knew it was all that could realistically be done.

The policemen did indeed spend just half an hour on their official duties, but the rest of the time in the pub.

Mike and Josh waited patiently for the peelers to slake their thirsts.

Eventually, the two now red-faced bobbies emerged from the Gladstone and staggered merrily away back down the lane.

Not too long after, the very cold, stiff and sore fugitive and student had finally made it into the back room of the sweetshop.

Josh and Mike were seated on two small chairs in the middle of the room, surrounded by boxes of confectionary which had been piled up high, almost to the ceiling.

"Thanks, Mike. I know it all seems dodgy, but you'll have to believe me when I say that things are not what they seem," said Josh.

"But what about those policemen? What did they want with you?"

Josh sighed.

"Although I wish it were otherwise, some of what I do is not exactly within the law, but there are good reasons."

"Like what?" asked Mike, who although bright was not yet of an age at which he could grasp the concept of grey areas in the rights and wrongs of

life.

"Sometimes, when I'm on the run, I have to steal things to survive, but I never, ever, hurt innocent people, and I only ever nick from those that can afford it."

"But you said on the run! Who are you on the run from?"

Josh smiled. "Sometimes, from the people I've already nicked from – then there's the peelers, of course – and sometimes far more sinister people which I can't talk about to you."

"Oh," said a disappointed Mike.

"Yes, Headmaster?" suddenly said Josh, while Mike looked around expecting to see Professor Winch. " . . . Yes, that was me, I called a few times but you didn't seem to be receiving . . . I'm in the back room of the shop . . . Yes, Mike Miller . . . . Yes, yes, I know, it's a long story – see you in a minute. . ."

Mike looked at Josh as if he had gone mad, while Josh again just smiled.

"It's called a telemagickeraph, Mike. It allows those who have such a thing to contact people."

"Oh," said Mike, who was none the wiser.

"Hello, Josh, are you OK?"

Mike, wondering just how many more shocks his system could take, looked up to see Professor Winch standing there.

"Hello, Headmaster, not too bad. Bit of a scare before, but young Mike helped me out," said Josh.

"Hello, young Miller. I know this must all be very mysterious to you and I insist that it must remain so, but I do need to speak to Josh – alone. Could I impose upon you to return to school?"

"Yes, Headmaster, I'll go now," replied Mike, standing up to leave.

"And I would be grateful if you would not mention anything of any of this, to anyone."

"No problem, Headmaster. Well – er – bye," said Mike, who had reached the door.

"Mike," shouted Josh.

Mike turned back round.

"Once the coast is clear, do you fancy calling round? You can even bring your friends, if you like."

"Yeah, OK, that'd be great!" said Mike, and left to return to a freezing cold tea.

"Josh Beecham!" came a yell from upstairs.

"Blimey! I'm off as well! We'll talk later," said Professor Winch.

*

Mike did indeed call again on his unusual new friend, often, and with his own friends in tow. It seemed that when the heat was off, Josh could settle into a settled daily routine. He would help run the shop, go for a few pints with Harry and Bryn, and enthral the children with tales of foreign lands – judiciously pruned of course – to preserve many grave secrets. However,

whenever the police, or the peelers called around, Josh would go into a panic and would recruit help from anyone and everyone to hide him.

Once, he was stuck among old Bryn's turnip field for three days and even had to endure an entire tractor load of manure being dumped right on top of him. He knew his rustic friend had a poor memory, so forgave him as he spluttered and spat out the disgusting mess from his mouth. This was at the same time as his forgetful rustic friend puffed on his pipe and collapsed on a hay bale, his sides aching with laughter.

One thing that Mike did notice. Whenever the more muscular, dangerous looking WSS called around, Josh did not hide, and instead did indeed go off willingly to help them with their enquiries – for months on end.

12

Time Flying By

MIKE MILLER AND HIS FRIENDS, after a more than satisfactory third year consisting of hard work and equal measures of fun, were now in their fourth year at Hemlock Hall and were rapidly maturing into fine young ladies and gentlemen.

All three boys and Abigail were also in the Camelot Empires team.

Mike and Madeline had both braved the trials at the start of the third year, and to Mike's amazement and the delight of his friends, he had been invited to join the team. The fact that he was taller, had filled out considerably and had even developed a food belly to give Leo some solid opposition, was of immense help as he braved the rather robust unstinting aerial battering which was otherwise known as a try-out.

Madeline had also been successful – at least at first. Her forte was speed and amazing dexterity upon a broomstick. She could evade direct hits by twists and turns, and although far from being the hardest hitter, she could get decent jabs in from seemingly impossible angles, but alas, it was not to be. At the very first practice she saw the six feet seven inches Japonica Lemon (Honey's even more brutal younger sister), whooshing towards her. Madeline flew off and away to Origami classes, never to grace the Empires Arena ever again.

To the eternal amusement of the two girls, neither Dutch nor Leo had quite found the courage and so both had declined to try for a place in the team along with Mike and Madeline. Another year passed, and both fourth year boys had come to the conclusion that it really was now or never. They both gritted their teeth, took the bull by the horns, and tried out for a place on the team – and succeeded. Leo's titanic girth saw jousting poles and even some illegal attacks simply bounce off his Friar Tuck style stomach; while Dutch – who had hardly shifted in height or girth – gave the team their very own 'Mr Nippy'. He was useless at face to face combat, but he could sneak up, get a handy wallop in to the back of the head – and retreat rather quickly.

Abigail surprised everybody – eventually. She too had tried out for Empires in the third year, but had not got the nod on that occasion, but when her chance came the next year, she took it – and how. She leant over the edge of the brick wall which ran right around the Arena, watching the trials. She saw Leo bounce everyone off the park; she saw Dutch sneak up, hit out and whoosh off – and came to the conclusion she could get in the team – somehow.

The new captain, Martin Martin, who had taken over from Tom Carpenter, thanked everyone and declared the trials to be over.

Abigail made a snap decision. She jumped over the wall, grabbed Leo's broomstick and jouster, whooshed to the centre of the pitch, soared up towards Martin Martin – and demanded that she be given a try-out. There were huge howls of laughter from everyone, including her friends – wrong move. With a very red face, but on this occasion red in anger, she lashed out with the jouster and belted the still laughing Martin Martin right across his front. He didn't budge an inch and laughed even more – not a good idea.

While Martin Martin was bellowing away, Abigail, with grunts only usually heard at Wimbledon, lashed out repeatedly, hitting Martin Martin across his back, his chest and to the side of the head. Finally, she lashed out wildly – missed – and the momentum took Abigail and her jouster right around, resulting in her sweeping the biggest, tallest and strongest student ever to attend Hemlock Hall right off his broomstick and down into the mud.

The laughing stopped, and Abigail was horrified and more than a little scared as to what would happen next; but she need not have worried. The eight feet seven inches Serge Gromenkov, a Cosslock prince with a ninety inch chest, stood up, de-muddied himself – smiled – and gestured for Abigail to come down and talk to him. Abigail, although with obvious reluctance, did as she was asked. Serge strode over to Abigail, hugged her, kissed her on both cheeks, and lifted her arm and raised it in some sort of triumphal ritual. To a combination of cheers and sighs of relief from many of the students dotted around the Arena, the again red-faced but now smiling Abigail turned full circle, waving to the crowd as she did so.

What Abigail did not know was that Martin Martin had still had no intention of inviting her to join the team, but one look from the gargantuan Cossack – and the expedient Martin Martin chose not to disagree with Serge Gromenkov – Abigail was in.

With the try-outs now well and truly over, Abigail walked over to Dutch and Leo who were standing on the edge of the pitch.

"Laugh now!" said the justifiably arrogant and somewhat angry Abigail.

"Sorry, Abbers," said Dutch.

"Sorry, Abbers," said Leo.

"Huh!" replied Abigail. But moments later she gave in, hugged both her friends, and they all walked back to the common room to tell Mike and Madeline – who were astounded but delighted.

The five friends, each of them with many strings to their respective bows, seemingly sailed through the school year, which despite tough end of year exams was over only too quickly.

They did have some regrets.

Firstly, four of the friends had so far been denied the glory of winning the Empires League Shield for Camelot House and the magnificent holiday that went with it. The team's lack of success was put down to Tom Carpenter's departure two years previously. Apparently it had been the lack of their former leader's inspiration and tactical brain which had caused the team to slip back so badly. This very verbal and direct assessment was delivered by

none other than Tom Carpenter himself; this was during the Annual School Reunion.

A highly disgruntled Martin Martin choked on his shandy and stormed out of the Glastonbury Hotel – only to run straight into Professor Cornstone. The professor did not want to know that bottled shandy contained less than 2% alcohol, and within minutes Martin Martin was digging up the just ripened shallots. Upon asking the professor if he was going to tell the head or his deputy, Professor Cornstone glanced in the direction of the cauliflower bed. But the ever hopeful Martin Martin, his team and the rest of Camelot House were all convinced that next year would be their year.

As for the School House Championship of which Empires was but one part, this had also eluded them all so far. However – although no student would ever dare say so within earshot of a teacher, the truth was this was of no consequence whatsoever – Empires was all that really mattered on the extracurricular honours front. What the younger students in the school were not to realise until they were a little older, and thus a little less naive, was the fact that most of the teachers felt exactly the same way.

It was the last week of July and the last day of their fourth year at Hemlock Hall. Tearful goodbyes were said as they each boarded their respective coaches for the surprisingly short drive home to Barnswick, Leicester, Basingstoke, Southport and East Ham.

Upon arriving home, Mike, as usual, just about managed to blurt out that he was fine and that he had had a good year, before it was time to get changed into his football kit for his first game of football of the holidays. This was of course, for the Barnswick Bedazzlers against their eternal opposition and constant enemies, Brazil.

*

The first three weeks of Mike's summer holidays were sheer bliss. If he wasn't playing football he was on days out with his friends, and – although supposedly reluctantly (but he secretly still enjoyed them), with his parents. But half way through the summer break, Mike began to feel more than a little under par. He was constantly tired, he looked pale, wasn't eating very well, and to his parents' puzzlement and his friends' disbelief, he missed two crucial games against Brazil.

Greasy was livid. He explained to the ashen-faced Mike at the door that Noah Marchment was about as much use in goal as a sumo wrestler would be in a ballet class. Mike, with bleary eyes, apologised and said he just wasn't up to it.

Mike's mum watched as Greasy went off muttering something about losing to Brazil for the first time in four years.

Half an hour later, Elsie Miller and her ashen-faced son were in the doctor's surgery. With the worried Mrs Miller standing to one side, Mike was being examined by the one of the oddest people he had ever seen.

Dr Phineas Cadwallader – a man in his 70s with a shock of seemingly electrified silver hair standing on end – semi-retired but still called out for

holiday cover, finally finished his poking and prodding and checking of ear, nose, throat, eyes, lungs and heart. He put down his freezing cold stethoscope and sat down behind his desk.

"Button your shirt up again, Mickle, my boy, that's it!"

As the shivering Mike struggled with his shirt buttons, the inanely smiling doctor turned to Elsie.

"Hmmm, only one thing for it . . . rest, Mrs Miller, rest! Seen it before dozens of times. These youngsters think they can party all night, work all day and then get straight back into their gladrags. Rest! That's what the lad needs! (Then, turning to Mike). Ease up, m'lad, forget Wee Willie Harris and Brenda Lee – join a glee club – I did! And look what it did for me!"

Mike and his mum quickly left the surgery; this was at the same time as the lustily delivered ditty, 'Constabulary duties to be done, to be done, a policeman's lot is not a happy one!' burst out of the consulting room, boomed right around the waiting room, drifted out of the main door, and travelled along in the air after them. This was followed by one last shout of "Rest, m'lad – you'll thank me later!" Elsie grabbed Mike's hand and ran straight home.

"He said what?!" said Mike's dad after arriving home after his bowling match. "Still, he's known for being a nutter, that one. Semi-retired?! Should be locked up!"

With Elsie not knowing what to say and with Mike simply sitting there staring into space, night-time came and Mike was coaxed up to bed early. What his parents did not know was that for some time Mike had not been getting anywhere near a peaceful night's sleep; in fact he had been having a succession of weird dreams – not quite nightmares but at times not far off.

Mike climbed into bed. Within minutes he seemed to be asleep, but he then sat bolt upright – muttered – 'Excalibur' – slumped back down, and drifted back off to a disturbed slumber to endure the same type of vivid dreams he had been having for some time – but without remembering a thing about them in the mornings. . .

13

Knight Night

IT WAS LATE IN THE SIXTH CENTURY. King Arthur was dead and his realm was once again in disarray. Sir Gawain, the new leader of the much reduced Knights of the Round Table, was struggling to keep peace and unity within the realm. The evil Sir Mordred – sworn enemy of Arthur and all of the goodly knights, was taking the opportunity to bring discord and cause chaos all over the land.

Merlin, friend turned traitor to King Arthur, was under sentence of death. Although Merlin was a more powerful sorcerer, King Arthur himself had been a wizard, and with the aid of additional powerful magic from many other sorcerers, had trapped and imprisoned his former ally. However, the spells which had been commissioned to keep Merlin confined to a cell in Glastonbury Prison until his execution date, dissipated rapidly after the tragic demise of Arthur Pendragon. Merlin escaped. Not even Sir Gawain could stop him.

But magic powers were not enough on their own to survive: Merlin was friendless and desperate. From the highest nobility down to the lowliest of serfs, most denied Merlin quarter, comfort and sustenance. Those that did offer sanctuary, wanted him to help them with exactly the same type of things which had brought so much misery to Merlin in the first place.

A desperate Merlin had used his magic to escape endless threats of being given up to either Gawain or Mordred, but that was all he could do, and even the power to do this was diminishing.

The merciful and reluctant Gawain had followed Arthur's lead and had delayed Merlin's execution many times, but he could not deny the serious consequences of Merlin's betrayals, nor the fact that his weak spirit belying his powerful magic could see him hostage to the bringers of torment upon all goodly folk. After Merlin's numerous escapes, Gawain's lenient and merciful disposition had been severely put to the test.

Merlin, more out of desperation than either wit or magic, had been forced back towards the area from which he had escaped. He approached the small hamlet of Denbrook, just outside the Citadel of Glastonbury: he was cold, tired, hungry and ill. Not even powerful magic can prevent such things when the very stuff of life is denied.

Michael the Miller of Denbrook and his wife Elsipeth were the personification of kindness. As Michael finished a hard day's work at his mill, Elsipeth was preparing a meal for the whole family.

As a tired Michael sat down and was immediately swamped by his young children, there was a loud knock on the door. Michael opened up to find

Merlin, whom he recognised immediately as being someone he had seen many times during his frequent deliveries to Camelot and its environs, leaning on the door frame. The fading sorcerer was badly stooped and breathing heavily.

"Hel-hel-help me, friend – I-I – am – dy. . ."

Merlin couldn't even finish his sentence and collapsed in the doorway.

A short while later Merlin came to, to find Elsipeth mopping his brow. Her eldest daughter, Alicia, was standing by with a bowl of hot broth.

"Th-thank ye, my dear, and you, child – you are your mother's daughter."

"Lie still and quiet, Merlin, you were very near death – easy now."

It was Michael who had spoken while standing on the other side of Merlin's makeshift bed. This was nothing more than an old wooden door resting upon four small stumps of wood, padded out with straw on top for Merlin to lay on. The old and weary traitor was sitting up with his head resting against the wall.

"I am feeling a little better," said Merlin in a weak, croaky voice. "You look familiar. Have we met before, friend?"

"Aye, that we have – often. We first met when your fortunes were rather different – but later – you used to watch from your solitary cell as I delivered the corn," replied Michael.

"Michael? Michael the Miller. . . ?" asked Merlin, with a vague memory of the stocky fair-haired man before him with the weather-beaten face.

"Aye, it be so, old timer. Now let Alicia feed you with some broth, it be a sin to let it go cold."

"Aye, thank you, friend. Thank you, my dear."

Merlin forced himself up in his bed a little more, and took as much as he could of the hot broth.

"Thank you, my child, no more. Thank you. I need to talk to your father, if I may. . ."

Alicia and her mother went off to collect firewood with the rest of the family, leaving the two men to talk alone.

"Thank you for your help and kindness, Michael, I am sorry to put you and your family in such peril. You will not be treated kindly by the knights if they knew."

"If helping a weak old man is a crime, then I would gladly swear my allegiance to God and King Arthur and let them take me. Do not worry for me or mine on that score, Merlin, but I cannot deny that you are indeed escaping justice. If Sir Gawain demands that you have to go back, then I must cede to his wishes – but with a plea for mercy. Do you accept this, Merlin. . . ?"

"Aye – if it be Sir Gawain, but such good men as you and he are given gifts of goodness which blinds the very same to the world about them. Have you not heard? Mordred is challenging Gawain's authority all over the land. So think on, kindly miller, it may not be Gawain who demands your hostage – but Mordred. This would be bad for both of us."

"But what about the rumours that you have sworn your allegiance to Mordred? Is this true?" asked Michael.

"If it be yea or nay you seek from me, then I cannot oblige – but if you will accept that I did indeed swear allegiance to Mordred rather than die at his hand – the only other choice offered by the accursed madman – will you believe this?"

"Believe it, yes – accept it as being the only path to take – no. Many good men have died while being offered such brand of mercy, our much loved king was one of them – do you accept this?"

"Aye – for the strong. My heart has never been as strong as my magic, I grant ye that, but all men are not made the same."

"To die in the fellowship of one so honoured or to live on in shame and disgrace – is choice, Merlin – it is not written in the stars. . ." said a sad Michael.

"To ponder further on whether I could and should have aided Arthur, even unto death, will have to wait, my friend, you have company, my life is in your hands. Choose as your heart tells you, for I am weak, old and ill and can do nought to either aid or hinder you," replied a still deathly weak Merlin.

There was a knock on the door – very loud.

"Open up, Miller! We wish to see your guest!"

Michael looked to Merlin, to the door, and back to Merlin.

"We wait not until harvest, Miller! Open up!"

Michael sighed. Whether it was Gawain's men or Mordred's made no difference, it would be no use trying to hold out. Michael opened the door to see four knights all in black chain-mail, stood there leering. Their helmets were dented and their tunics were bloodied. One was even swigging on a flagon of ale.

The oldest and most blood-covered knight spoke.

"I am Leopold of the Moors and Lieutenant to Mordred. Do you hold the magician Merlin within your domicile?"

Michael went to answer, but before he could his wife Elsipeth suddenly appeared by his side.

"Michael! Do not be rude! Let the good men of Mordred share in our supper! Come! Come in! Will you sup with us, goodly knights?" asked Elsipeth.

"Aye, good lady," replied Leopold, who then turned to his fellow lawmen-cum-roisterers.

"Let us share their table, men! And the first one to curse in this friendly hovel – gets my boot!"

Four loud, boozy, bloody, smelly knights of Mordred strode past a dumbstruck Michael the Miller to sit at the long, rough, wooden dining table. More importantly, there was no Merlin. Thankfully, the four men in bloodied chain-mail, now looking forward to an unexpected feast, had quickly put their quarry out of their minds, at least temporarily.

The four somewhat less than chivalrous knights not only ate most of the humble broth served to them by their hosts, but ate all their bread, drank all of their ale, their cider, and their spirit brewed from turnips.

During this impromptu repast, Michael could not help but look around to see where Alicia and the rest of his children had gone, but they were nowhere to be seen. He then looked across to the space by the wall where the makeshift bed had been only a short while before, but the bed had now gone – seemingly taking its ailing occupant with it. However, Michael also noticed Elsipeth very slightly shake her head each time he looked about him. Although the sudden disappearance of his children was playing badly on his mind, he realised that somehow, with split-second timing belying his gravely ill state, Merlin had made good his escape. Michael could only hope that the untrustworthy magician had not taken the children along with him as hostages. Despite him finding it exceptionally difficult to do so, Michael did his best not to dwell on such worrying possibilities and resigned himself to playing along in the way his wife seemed to want him to. The worried miller sighed inwardly and resumed the unwelcome task of feigning a warm welcome for his unwanted guests.

Finally, after a succession of burps and worse, the sinister knights had filled their bellies and had slaked their thirsts. They were on their way – but only after Leopold had turned to Michael at the door.

"Mind now, Miller – if you see him, tell me first, not Gawain. Hic!"

Leopold then went to tap his nose and wink, but instead he poked himself in the eye. The drunken lieutenant stumbled through the doorway, fell to the left – and ended up in the trough. His equally inebriated comrades dragged him up again, and away they went, arms around each other's shoulders, singing songs of drunken revelry – and threatening a group of elderly arthritic nuns on their way back from the well.

No sooner had he closed and bolted the door, than the grave-faced Michael turned to his wife.

"Elsipeth, where are the children?! Where has Merl-"

"Shhh, my husband," said the kindly Elsipeth with a smile, while placing a finger on Michael's lips. "The children are safe. They are sitting on the woodpile, enjoying Saturday's cheese. As for Merlin, he has gone far from here, but he is safe and well again."

"My lady! By all that is good and holy, please explain to me what is going on this night?!"

"I cannot tell you all, Michael, as I do not know myself. What I do know is, it is better for the whole realm and indeed for Merlin himself, that he is many leagues and many days travel away from Camelot."

Michael sighed, shook his head, smiled, and then embraced his wife.

"You are full of surprises, lady! But why? Some say Merlin was just as guilty as Mordred in the death of Arthur – your kin."

"I cannot deny that this may be the truth, Michael, but Mordred will either kill Merlin or have him working his magic against the good folks of this land.

Neither is right. It is better that he is gone even though he again escapes the righteous justice of the goodly Sir Gawain."

"But what if Merlin works his magic anyway?"

"He cannot do any more magic, Michael – none."

"What are you saying, my lady? You did not drink the turnip sap, did you?"

"Come, Morgana! It is time to tell the befuddled love of my life of such trickeries you have used on Merlin," said the still smiling Elsipeth with a glance over her shoulder.

From the rear of the room from behind a curtain, stepped out a tall, elegant but sinister looking woman dressed all in black. It was Morgana, feared sorceress and supposedly another of Mordred's allies.

"Morgana! This night gets stranger as the moon gets fuller!"

"Aye, Michael, I will not deny that, but I could not have Merlin forced to bring ruin on the world, not even I could sanction that."

"But you are an ally of Mordred!"

"Alas – that is what the world thinks – and I do cede that there was truth in it once, but not now."

Michael could not take all of this in. He sat at the table pondering over what the last few hours had brought, but Morgana would not let him be and sat opposite him.

"Time is of the essence, Michael. I need to tell you of what I have done, of what I have planned to do for some time. I knew Merlin was being forced back through the west and that he would pass through here. I knew, too, that he was very weak and that if he did not receive kindness and help from someone, he would die. I did not know it would be you and Elsipeth, but neither does this surprise me.

"Like you, good lady (smiling at Elsipeth), I do not wish Merlin either dead or in the power and purse of another. The time came for me to act, to put right many shameful things as well as helping the spirit of Arthur live on in those that follow still. Using my most powerful magic, I created a Reverse spell which takes magic in from outside, rather than releasing it.

"Some days go, while Merlin was at slumber, I whispered the incantation. Not long after, Merlin's powers began to fade, but beware of one thing: I can take the power from Merlin's mind but I cannot fight magic that has already left it. Although with blessings from above, Merlin's most evil creations may never threaten the world in the way the evil side of Merlin would wish.

"Finally, to aid Merlin, I used another spell this very night to get him far away from here. He is now well again and is in the land of Romania, but he has yet to discover that all his powers have gone, but he will do so very soon. Although my all-seeing eye sees many troubled times ahead in that land, and although he will suffer at the hands of one of Guinevere's kin – he will recover from this also and live on. I have allowed Merlin to take one magic charm of his own creation with him which will give him long life. As to whether he uses his time well is beyond even my power to influence.

"But of the magic I have stolen away, it cannot be stored very long, it has

to be released, but with great caution. Such magic cannot drift in the air without purpose, for Mother Nature herself would suffer from spells without thought or direction and bring great troubles for the world, but my time here is as precious as it is short and I have to leave you soon – but there is much to be emptied from this wand."

Morgana stopped, looked at Michael, then at Elsipeth, and then smiled rather strangely.

"And so to you – Michael the Miller! And to you – the good Lady Elsipeth of Pendragon! Fare thee well!"

Morgana performed a circular motion with her wand as if she was trying to enchant the whole house and every one in it. The room was immediately filled with an intense bright white light.

By the time the light had eased and the astonished miller and his wife had rubbed their eyes, Morgana was gone. After coming to the conclusion that they had both had enough excitement for one evening, Michael and Elsipeth called the children back in and all retired to bed. But the drama still wasn't over.

Some two hours later, Michael suddenly awoke and sat bolt upright. After quickly locating the source of the mildly painful tingling sensation which had disturbed him from his slumber, he was astonished to find fire shooting out of his fingertips and that somehow he had managed to turn the good Lady Elsipeth into a wild boar.

"By Arthur's beard!" shouted Michael.

What Morgana did not know was that Merlin's magic was even more ingenious than she had realised. Merlin had long ago formulated something he called Regenerative-Magic. Should he ever have his magic stolen, it would regenerate in every twentieth generation of the family that stole it, or at least currently possessed it. This ensured the power was not lost through continual use – but each rebirth gave it new potency, but more importantly it kept the magic alive until the day Merlin could take it back.

*

Merlin was in Romania – powerless. He was at that moment being hunted down by a rather large dragon. He ducked into a small cave on a mountainside, just as a dragon claw scraped the outside of the cave. Merlin yelled in anger, although this was aimed at his totally innocent one-time host.

"Miller! You will pay for this! I and my kin shall haunt you and your scions for all eternity!"

Merlin then mused on whether he or future generations of his kin could and would ever make good this boast, as the only family Merlin had was one solitary nephew – a strolling minstrel and roving wastrel – one Gemini Zenith – the First. . .

14

The Game's Afoot

FINALLY, Doctor Levin, the Millers' usual doctor, returned from holiday. Elsie Miller gleaned this vital information from their next door neighbour, old Madge Higgins. She had been diagnosed by the certifiable Dr Cadwallader as having cat flu'. She had only attended the surgery to ask about inhalers for her asthmatic niece.

Doctor Levin gave Mike the once-over and was satisfied that he did not need anything more than continued rest, plenty of fresh air and a healthy diet – especially oranges. Mike slumped back in his bed while his mum and dad stood there with the doctor.

"Hmm – yes – well . . . now I know it's the last thing you want to hear, but it is as – er – my esteemed colleague said – exhaustion."

"Are you sure, Doctor? He's had his dad and I very worried this last week, he's normally so lively and ruddy-cheeked," said Elsie.

"And ruddy cheeky, no doubt! Sorry, sorry, shouldn't have said that, but I just couldn't resist it."

"No need," chuckled Elsie, "you're right, he can be. I only wish he was ruddy cheeky right now."

Mike's dad just gave a worry-spoilt smile as the doctor scratched his head and sighed.

"Look, I know he looks terribly pale and has obviously lost his perkiness, but I have seen this quite often. Too much going on in school, then homework, and then the football – usually is with lads of his age – am I right?"

Jack and Elsie just nodded.

"I honestly don't think there is any need, but if I call back in, let's say . . . three days? I'm sure he'll be well by then, but if you are still concerned, then we'll take it further. What do you say?"

"Yes, Doctor, thank you," agreed Elsie.

"Thanks for calling," said Jack, but still far from happy. They watched Doctor Levin drive off, and Jack shut the front door. "Quacks, the lot of 'em!"

"No, Jack, he knows what he's doing," said Elsie. "Besides, if things don't change we can still take him straight to the hospital."

That night Jack and Elsie Miller checked on Mike one last time, couldn't rouse him for supper, and so retired for what was a disturbed night of rest – for all of the Miller family.

Mike tossed and turned, perspired heavily and kicked off his quilt, muttering incoherently for a minute or so before returning to the almost serialised and rather sinister dreams of magic and treachery throughout the

ages. . .

*

It was 1843. Professor Gemini Zenith the Ninth – a tall, broad-shouldered man with long black hair and ruddy red cheeks – had been the bane of the magic community for many years. He was a descendant of Merlin and had many evil followers called The League of Mordred. As a scion of an all-magic family, he did not need to inherit or even steal his forefather's powers – he had his own, and then some. Despite this, his ultimate goal in life was to reclaim something far more powerful than he could ever have formulated himself, and was something his ancestor had indeed possessed at one time. But not only this: he was not content just to be kingmaker turned king breaker as Merlin had been, but was determined to go on and rule both the magic and ordinary communities of the British Isles and then the world, but he had been thwarted in his many attempts thus far.

It was legend within his family that their forefather, Merlin, had lived out his years in disgrace. They heard at the knees of successive grandfathers about how Merlin had so very nearly triumphed over his one-time friend, King Arthur. They heard about Merlin's secret weapon; a magic invention so powerful, so terrible, that even King Arthur had not been able to destroy it and so had had to bury it and instigate a worldwide force of wizards to prevent this terrible weapon from ever being triggered. The young Gemini Zenith dreamed of the day he would complete the work started by his evil ancestor, but he had to bide his time.

The ambitious young wizard went to the magic world's very own highly acclaimed University of Abracadrystwyth and was rewarded for his hard work with an honours degree in Magic. After postgraduate studies at yet another magical educational establishment, Lesterjester University, he commenced his evil plotting against the powers of good so as to gain the world supremacy which would surely follow – after, of course, first gaining control of this mysterious secret weapon.

Zenith soon learned that not only was his odious forefather still alive, courtesy of a powerful Longevity spell, but that he (Zenith) had an unexpected opportunity to seize control of this terrible weapon. King Arthur Pendragon of the Britons, had – maybe foolishly – decreed that what he had done in protecting the secret weapon – in reality, four secret weapons called Chaotagens – could only be undone by one of his own line, but there was no provision in this magic decree for preventing one of his own then triggering the Chaotagens, should they somehow be in the power of one who desired such carnage.

Many years were to pass before Professor Zenith would be able to start putting his plan into action; two world wars would come and go before he would begin raising his wand in such terrible anger and with such global carnage on his mind. But right here and now, in an era ordinary folk refer to as between the wars, he had a rather pressing personal matter to attend to. Revenge. Before leaving his abode to serve the dish best served cold, he sat

and mused on people, places and events from many years before. . .

*

Wallace Tunstall was a Victorian wizard. As a young man, Wallace had been handsome, dashing, brave and rich. The young Wallace, so used to perfection in everything in the magic world into which he had been born, was easily bored and discontented. He needed a challenge.

Young Tunstall left his home and settled, for a while, in the perfectly ordinary world of Victorian London, where every street corner was a microcosm of such a polarised society. He would raise his top hat to many a gentleman and his lady-friend, and then politely dig out a few shillings from his pocket to give to many a poor beggar walking the same streets.

As a rich bachelor of Victorian society, he was, as the saying goes, eligible, very eligible indeed. Many a meddling mother of society debutantes tried to arrange introductions, but they always ended in failure. For Wallace there was only one girl, and her name was Clarabella Holmes-Huntley.

Clarabella attended all of the same dinner parties in London town, hunting weekends on country estates and nights at the ballet and opera that Wallace attended. At first this was coincidence, but the quickly smitten Wallace soon planned his own season to tie in with Clarabella's social schedule. Unbeknown to Wallace, at least at first – Clarabella had done the same.

Clarabella's father, Baron Rufus Holmes-Huntley wanted the very best for his only child. As Wallace became more and more open over his infatuation with Clarabella, her father's intentions for his daughter became clearer, much clearer.

One night there was the usual gathering of guffawing, bemonacled twits and blushing, swooning post-debutantes in the drawing room of Farringdale Hall, the home of Greville Dubarry-West, Earl of Winterglade.

Lord Rufus, a close friend of the Earl, espied the young rascal holding the knitting of old Gwladys Dubarry-West, while regaling Clarabella – who was sitting next to the old girl, with tales of derring-do in strange, far off lands.

As for the Baron, he had had enough, and not just of this evening's peacocking from the young upstart, but of his continued presence at almost every society gathering over the last year or so.

It was time to put into action a scurrilous plan the old Earl had devised and had put to him. Lord Rufus had been only too eager to agree and had decided to duly play along. He looked at the old Earl, who gravely nodded and who then slyly reached out and pulled on a bell-rope which was immediately followed by a loud knock at the door.

The footmen, despite their spirited protests, were pushed aside as four burly London policemen, or peelers, strode into the drawing room. Three stayed near to the door while the other went to the centre of the room and addressed the gathering.

"We are looking for someone called Wallace Tunstall, better known to the Metropolitan Police as 'Harry the Blag'. He is wanted in connection with several burglaries from five estates within the Home Counties."

Clarabella screamed and fainted and Wallace went to her aid – only to find the walking stick of old Greville barring his way.

"Oh no you don't, laddie. Officers! This is the blaggard you are looking for!"

The four peelers rushed over and restrained poor Wallace, who was certainly not going to go quietly.

"Let go of me! I am not a criminal! I haven't stolen anything! There has obviously been some ghastly mistake! Please, Clarabella, tell them!"

Clarabella, upon being brought round with smelling salts, could only utter, "Oh, how I trusted you! How stupid of me! And you repay my trust with lies and plans to rob my father, and to kill him, no doubt! Murderer! Murderer!" screamed Clarabella. "Oh, take him, begone with him, before he can rob again! Before he can kill any more poor defenceless old men! Oh my poor heart, I shall never love again! MURDERER!"

Clarabella put her hand to her forehead and fainted – again.

Wallace, who had never robbed anyone of a single penny never mind killed an old man, knew it was useless to resist. He was led away with his hands cuffed and his head bowed.

Clarabella was instead aided and comforted by a tall man with long black hair and ruddy red cheeks. It was none other than Professor Gemini Zenith. Although to the good folks of society he was Alastair Glen-Warren, Laird of Unst – who lived on a wild, barren, five-thousand acre estate, North Wind Manor – on the Isle of Unst in the Shetland Islands. The reality was, at that precise moment there was no such place. Unlike Wallace he really was there to relieve the aristocracy of their prized possessions, at least at first; but something else, or rather someone else – was now occupying his thoughts – and his heart.

Lord Rufus smiled at old Greville, who smiled back. So did the four policemen who were well paid for their spot of overtime.

It wasn't long before Alastair declared his intentions.

*

Alastair Glen-Warren's marriage to Clarabella Holmes-Huntley was looming ever nearer. Professor Zenith really was smitten. He had been so desperate to marry Clarabella, he had ended up funding his bogus aristocratic lifestyle with every ill-gotten penny, pound, pluto and jupiter he had plundered from both worlds. However, one evening the old fraudster with magic powers was very nearly rumbled. This was when a fellow guest at dinner, one Ross Macaleevey, Provost Magistrate of Orkney and Shetland, racked his brain as to why he had never come across either such a title or such an estate. The quick thinking professor simply said it was because the previous incumbent, very recently deceased, was a distant cousin with a different surname, and that as he was English was loth to be known as the Laird. He further explained he had simply renamed the estate because he didn't like its existing name. Knowing that he would be asked what it was formerly known as, he asked to be momentarily excused as he had a slight fever and needed some fresh air.

The bogus laird walked outside, made himself invisible, and went straight back to the table where his fellow guests were pondering over which estate it was that Alastair had actually inherited. He listened, and remembered all of the possibilities put forward. Bingo! Ross Macaleevey himself mentioned one which fitted the bill perfectly.

" . . . Of course, there's old man Fothergill. He is – or was – as English as they come. Didn't know he'd left us, though, very sad. He lived on Unst – wild and windy there, you know, no trees because of it. Baltasound Waters was his old place, if I'm not mistaken . . . now, Greville, old chap . . . about that blasted fellow escaping from prison. . ."

A short while later, Alastair rejoined his fellow dinner companions and apologised for his absence.

" . . . Yes, a lot better thank you – now – back to where we were. Macaleevey, you were saying? Oh, yes, we were talking about the old name of the estate. Baltasound Waters, old fellow; it's very cold and very remote, desolate really, but it appeals to the poet within my soul. Pass the port would you, there's a dear. . ."

There was one other man who was also at dinner. He was also invisible and had been all night. It was none other than poor Wallace.

It was about six months previously that he had been locked up, but with a tricky combination of magic and perfectly normal guile, he had escaped from his police cell. He had been careful while imprisoned not to give away his true status, thus ensuring his captors (and then perceived bunglers), did indeed think that their prisoner had made a daring escape. Initially, he had not suspected Alastair, but he did want to know why he had been set up by his true love's father and his old friend, and so had made regular but unscheduled visits to not only the Holmes-Huntley abode, but many other aristocratic big houses, all while invisible of course.

It was during one such clandestine visit that the unseen Wallace had overheard a conversation between the old man and his wife, Lady Merinda Holmes-Huntley. . .

"Merinda, my dear, we've been through this a million times. He had money, yes, but breeding? Highly doubtful, my dear, highly doubtful. Now look, Clarabella is perfectly happy with Alastair, and that's all there is to it."

Wallace now knew the reasons: he wasn't good enough, at least not for the old man. However, such was his love for Clarabella that he couldn't stay away. He was very glad that he had not. Although remaining invisible he had milled around an endless succession of stately homes and draughty castles so he could be near to his Clarabella. And now – this evening – he had witnessed the tricks pulled by Alastair Glen-Warren; not only was he a conman – he was a fellow wizard.

The aggrieved young bachelor went away to formulate a plan, but it was difficult. If he contacted the real Laird of Baltasound Waters, then surely the game would be up. However, before he could even begin his sleuthing, the so called Alastair Glen-Warren had wasted no time at all in killing Lord

Fothergill and usurping his title, fortune and estate – although duly amended in name. Tragically for Wallace, the evil professor had killed the last real Laird of the estate – single, childless and the last remaining Fothergill of Unst, late of London. Now late of Unst too.

A short time later, Wallace was sitting in his apartment in Golders Green, musing. He smiled – and jumped up right out of his seat — 'Eureka!'

Wallace Tunstall's lightbulb moment had resulted in him concluding that although Zenith was a fraud, he had thought of a way of exposing him for the charlatan that he was. He believed there was a chance, a good chance, that a stream of letters addressed to old Fothergill would set the alarm bells ringing somewhere. He then decided to go further: he would hit Alastair, or whoever he really was – with a double whammy – an equally damning salvo of correspondal missiles addressed to none other than Alastair Glen-Warren; some would supposedly be from relatives with terrible grievances against their kin, while others would be from irate creditors demanding the return of absolute fortunes loaned to him to finance his gambling addiction. There would also be a letter from the police stating that Wallace Tunstall had been set up and would Glen-Warren help them with their enquiries? These would be tempered by less controversial matters such as requests from local fishermen wanting the right to fish from the far shores of the estate.

But Wallace then put the icing on the cake, as it were. They would all find their way into the hands of Clarabella Holmes-Huntley – but how? Wallace smiled – a grim smile, but a smile. He had a plan. In fact, it was much the same plan he had formulated to enable him to remain close to Clarabella, but this time the stakes were far higher.

Wallace's initial observations revealed that Glen-Warren's visits to Clarabella did not conform to a regular pattern. On many occasions during the season that one would expect two lovers to be together, Glen-Warren simply wasn't there. Wallace mused on the fact that this might mean nothing at all, but equally it could mean something deeply sinister was at play. It was also frustrating for Wallace that on these nights, his observations of such a villainous fraud were pointless. He decided to up his game. He had realised that just observing Glen-Warren only when he was conveniently in town was of no use at all. Wallace resolved to doggedly follow Glen-Warren wherever he went on each night he was not with Clarabella.

It wasn't long before Wallace Tunstall knew all about Alastair Glen-Warren aka Gemini Zenith the Ninth, as well as his minions, The League of Mordred. However, his finding out that they were very bad lads had not advanced his plans to expose Glen-Warren for what he truly was, one iota – until one damp, foggy night several months later.

After shadowing his prey on yet another of Glen-Warren's many jaunts away from his intended, Wallace found himself in an East London dock warehouse. This filthy, grimy hole was used as the headquarters of The League of Mordred – Professor Zenith's sinister followers – whenever they had plans to terrorise the non-magic community.

There were no cheery salutes from the League upon their leader's return. This was because he had taken all of their loot to finance his happy life with Clarabella. The League were actually plotting their leader's downfall. Professor Zenith had sensed this some time previously, and so duly arrived at this evening's meeting with an ace up his sleeve.

Zenith stood on an old crate to address his disgruntled minions.

"My loyal followers! You should not doubt me, especially now! I am not taking all that we have won for my own comfort and pleasure! No no no! It is to finance one last battle with the sons of Pendragon and their allies! You! Sons of Mordred! You have longed many years for this day as did your ancestors! Many died after waiting eons for their chance to strike back. They died, uttering, 'Death to Arthur and all who follow him!' upon their lips. Should you, can you, *will you* besmirch their memory?! No, of course you will not, you cannot! No more could *I*, a son of Merlin, not take such an opportunity to rid this country – this world – of their foul stench of goodliness.

"Holy Grail?! When we have finished with them, they will all look like unholy gruel! What say you all?!"

"AYE!"

The evil Professor Zenith took the remainder of their ill-gotten gains – one-million pounds sterling and seven-million jupiters and walked out of the warehouse, grinning.

Wallace Tunstall now knew the type of man he was dealing with, and knew he would have to be ultra cautious as he proceeded with his plans, although these were extended to be a triple whammy. There would be even more letters addressed to none other than Professor Gemini Zenith.

Wallace knew that initially he would have to play a waiting game; he knew he could only act when he knew Zenith had left the country.

Two days later, Wallace was once again in the rat infested warehouse listening to Professor Zenith rabble-rousing his followers. It was during this evil-meet that Wallace sensed he had an opportunity to put his daring plan into action.

"Brothers! Tonight I take the battle to Romania! Many of our comrades need our help! Are you with me?!"

"AYE!"

An hour later, Wallace Tunstall called upon the residence of Lord Holmes-Huntley, he was admitted immediately. He was shown into the drawing room where Clarabella was sitting reading abook. The footman introduced the visitor.

"Alastair! I thought you were on business in Romania! This is a delightful surprise!" exclaimed Arabella.

"Yes, my darling, a surprise indeed. I'm afraid my business trip would have been fruitless, the market has collapsed. However, I would like to extend an invite to both you and your family. The estate is now ready to move into, but I'm afraid it needs a woman's touch. I was wondering if you and your mother

and the old so' – er – the jolly old sausage would like to come with me now?"

"Now, Alastair? This is very odd."

"Yes, I know, but if you do not come now, then I'm afraid it is unlikely that you will be able to see it until after we are wed, and I'm sure you would like to have everything just perfect for when we start our new life together."

Eventually, after much consultation and discussion between Wallace and old Rufus, the invitation was eventually accepted. Wallace breathed a sigh of relief.

After frantic packing, and after Clarabella and her mother had suffered no less than seven fainting fits between them, they were ready to go.

Wallace Tunstall, Lord and Lady Holmes-Huntley, Clarabella, as well as six of their domestic staff, endured a nightmare journey by horse and carriage up to Aberdeen. This was followed by an horrendous fifteen-hour ferry crossing to Lerwick in the Shetland Islands, and a series of alternating carriage and ferry rides across three different islands. The cold, tired and hungry travellers finally arrived on the cold, barren, windswept island of Unst.

A pale Clarabella, her rather pasty-faced family and an equally ashen entourage, finally walked up to the entrance of North Wind Manor. They were, of course, led by their host and fellow traveller, one Wallace Tunstall, still disguised as Professor Gemini Zenith – aka Alastair Glen-Warren.

As they were shown into the hallway by a maid, Clarabella noticed a large stack of unopened letters on a ledge in the hallway.

"Darling, what are these?" asked Clarabella.

"Um? Oh, letters, I suppose. Open them if you wish, probably the local villagers wanting me to open a fete or something."

"Are you sure?"

"No – not really, it could be an invite for tea from the Bishop of Lerwick.

"No, silly, I meant about opening them."

"Oh, silly me, yes, go right ahead. Er – darling, could you please excuse me for a few minutes? Robertson the gamekeeper is awfully upset about something . . . tell Mater and Pater I won't be long."

"Yes, all right, but do hurry! There's so much you have got to show us."

To Wallace's knowledge there wasn't even a gamekeeper employed on the estate, but what he was really doing was giving Clarabella plenty of time to open every letter and for the truth to sink in that Alastair was not who he said he was. He deliberately went outside to aid the facilitation of such a dramatic realisation. Fortunately there really was a gamekeeper who really was rather upset about birds of prey worrying the lambs –although his name was Sandison. Wallace introduced himself, which was a mistake as Zenith had already done so, but it was of no consequence – but the scream emanating from back in the house certainly was. This was followed by the time-honoured shout of, "Fetch the smelling salts!"

At this point, Wallace Tunstall's plans started to go wrong, to some degree. He was about to walk back in and face the music, admit everything, and

agree to be handed over to the local police.

But then Wallace heard the tell-tale slow whooshing sound of a broomstick descending. He hid behind the dry-stone wall of a grain store, and peered around to see Professor Zenith running up the path to see who on earth had moved into his house.

Unfortunately for Wallace and the other uninvited guests, Zenith's little sortie in Romania had been quickly repelled. Zenith and his followers had gone to Bucharest to take on the might of the local warlocks who controlled the whole town, but they had underestimated their strength. After a frantic battle up and down the famed Lipsca thoroughfare, Zenith and The League of Mordred were finally beaten back, but not before a huge section of the outdoor market was totally destroyed, thus giving unwitting metaphorical credence to at least a little of Wallace's cover story.

The smelling salts quickly took effect. Clarabella looked up to see Alastair Glen Warren staring down at her. She stood, smacked him in the face, and fainted – again. Upon being brought round once more, she threatened legal action if Alastair, or Gemini – or whoever he was – ever came within a million miles of her or her family. Clarabella also realised it was her evil suitor who had caused the estrangement between her and Wallace, whom she still loved dearly.

Professor Zenith was thinking on his feet, both literally and figuratively. He mused on the fact that he had not only been rumbled, but that he had been rumbled by a fellow wizard – but whom?

Wallace was panicking. A rational Zenith could decide that killing his unwanted guests would be the right course of action; an angry, irrational Zenith could do so regardless. Despite it being a cold blustery day, beads of sweat trickled down his temples.

The carriage full of aggrieved aristocrats shot off over the rough track towards the ferry point. Professor Zenith raised his wand – Wallace raised his, although what he could or would do to help Clarabella was far from certain as he'd never raised or pointed a wand in anger at another human being in all his life. The carriage was getting further and further away. Zenith was deep in thought. Very gradually he lowered his wand. Clarabella would live.

Wallace was not sure as to whether Zenith had done this out of his love for Clarabella, or because it did not make sense to attract even more attention to himself from the non-magic community which had unwittingly provided him with shelter and privacy.

Wallace needed to get back, and fast. He rushed from his hiding place, heard a dull thud behind him but couldn't stop to see what it was. He stole Zenith's broomstick and away he went.

Some time later he realised he must have dropped his silver snuff box with the initials *'WT'* engraved upon it, but where?

Immediately upon his return home he wrote to Clarabella – a month later they were married. He gave a full explanation to Clarabella of his other-world

heritage, and even suggested that they, as well as Clarabella's family, should live in the magic world. There, they would get at least some protection from a vengeful Professor Zenith, in the ordinary world there would be none.

Professor Zenith swore an oath of revenge upon those who had taken away the only person he had ever loved. He did not have a clue as to who this was. He did not suspect Wallace Tunstall in the least; it was a wizard he was looking for, but he had dismissed Wallace as being nothing but a Hooray Henry.

Professor Zenith never was exposed to the ordinary world as a fraud. Clarabella's family, finally in the know, and ashamed (and grateful to boot) upon receiving forgiveness from Wallace, knew it would be pointless trying to punish the evil professor. And who would believe them?

*

One day many years later, and while still masquerading as one of the gentry, Professor Gemini Zenith fell off his horse and broke his arm.

After struggling over the uneven ground so as to lean on a dry-stone wall, he found that the pain was making him feel dizzy and nauseous. Zenith simply couldn't help it and slid to the ground, only to find that he had sat on something rectangular, solid and hard. With a titanic effort he raised himself up again slightly, felt around, located the offending article, and picked it up and lifted it to his face.

It was a solid silver snuffbox. After examining it close-to he saw that the lid had been engraved with the initials – *'WT'*. It didn't take long for Zenith to put two and two together.

"So it was you after all!" yelled Gemini Zenith, beside himself with rage. "If you are still alive, Tunstall, then prepare to die! If not, I will wreak my vengeance upon the House of Tunstall for the rest of my life!"

15

Razamataz Mania

MIKE WAS STILL NO BETTER, two days after Doctor Levin had called.

Jack and Elsie had had the worst row of their married life, and Jack was all for taking Mike to hospital, but Elsie wanted to wait one more day. Jack was about to lift Mike out of his bed and whizz him straight off in the car to Barnswick Royal Infirmary – but he saw his beloved sitting on Mike's bedroom chair and sobbing her heart out. Jack didn't change his mind as such, but he knew he would have to comfort his dear Elsie. He leaned over, hugged her tight, and burst into tears himself. What they didn't see was a shadow which suddenly fell across the window.

An elderly man in a long flowing cloak stood outside the window, and whispered. This was followed by a little blue flash of light, and the old man disappeared into the night. With their eyes glazed over, Elsie and Jack retired to bed for the best night's sleep they had had in years, but Mike continued to dream strange dreams. He mumbled – "Jemmy" – and rolled right over.

*

The patenting of inventions in the magic world was, and still is, a very vexed issue indeed. And this has had a lot to do with a member of the Miller family, who, despite being born in the Regency Period, came into his own in the Victorian era. His name was Jeremiah Miller, but commonly known as Jemmy. Being called so had just as much to do with his five prison sentences for breaking and entering, as an informal contraction of his first name. Despite his criminal leanings he was quite bright, and could and should have carved out a successful career in any one of a number of worthy trades, but it was not to be.

*

Jemmy Miller was out and about on one of his frequent night-time jaunts. He had deftly scaled the wall of Lord Farley's Buckinghamshire Estate and had made himself as comfortable as possible on the damp ground, keeping himself hidden from view behind the estate's considerable cluster of rhododendron bushes. He was waiting for an opportunity to redistribute some of His Lordship's finest silverware among the poor – among the poor that is, of the Miller family of Barnswick, but late of London.

As Jemmy sat waiting patiently for the right moment to grab the swag, he heard the sound of twigs cracking and snapping. Then came a voice: "Jemmy."

Thinking that an associate had turned up to muscle in on his turf, Jemmy turned to the shadowy figure standing next to him.

"'Ere! What's your game, pal?! I was 'ere first!" Jemmy protested.

"I am here to help you, Jeremiah," replied Professor Winch.

Jemmy realised from the rather plummy voice that this was most certainly not an associate.

"Huh! Funny time for the parish do-gooders to be knockin' abaht. Well, go on then, let's 'ear all abaht 'ow lags like me don' 'as to be lags like me, and iv we promise not to be lags like me and get a proper job and work hard, we can all be fine upstandin' members of the community an' everyfin' 'll be nice 'n' toasty cos we've gone straight – all cos you do-gooders says so. Now let's 'ave yer pitch then clear off – I've a crust to make."

Professor Winch ignored the cynical diatribe.

"I have been trying to contact you for a very long time, Jemmy. I'm sorry to sound so mysterious, but what is tonight's – er – blag, worth to you?"

"Gordon Bennett! I remember when I could go out on a blag, eat me butties, grab the swag, and be 'ome before any of the peelers could reach for their whistle! What do you want?" asked a demented Jemmy.

"Please, Jeremiah, I do not have much time. How much do you expect to make from what you are planning to steal tonight?"

"Abaht a fiver, but don' tell me ole' lady, as far as she's concerned I ain't never earned more than free on a blag."

"Here's ten pounds. This is a fiver not to steal anything tonight, and the other five is to ask for a few moments of your time, by the end of which I hope you will never steal anything ever again."

"You're on!" smiled Jeremiah, thinking this was yet another ploy from the Parish to put him on the straight and narrow. However, what he heard in the next ten minutes made him visibly shudder, go white, and nearly faint. The parish do-gooder was actually a wizard who went by the name of Professor Gabriel Winch, and who seemed to have an awful lot of clout in a world of magic that Jemmy found difficult to believe existed . . . at first. In his capacity of Chief Officer of the Ambiguities Department, the professor had finally caught up with Jeremiah Miller to pass on the strange tidings that he, Jemmy, was also a wizard.

Moreover, the old man seemed to think that it was Jemmy's destiny to leave all that he had known behind and to go off and live in this strange land. The professor even cast a few harmless spells to finally make Jemmy believe that what he was telling him was true. Since Merlin's everlasting trickery had become known, the magic community had taken it upon themselves to monitor the generations of Millers, and to act quickly when a twentieth generation of the family had been identified. This was to ensure that burgeoning and possibly unrecognised magic powers could be explained, controlled, and nurtured appropriately. On occasions this was more difficult than had been envisaged, and the person in question could be well beyond the tender age where such appropriate schooling would help. Indeed, Jemmy's ignorance of his own power had seen some comic and some tragic results. One such episode occurred while he was on the run from the peelers

after trying to steal the Archbishop of Canterbury's sceptre. He was amazed to find that he could easily outrun a police carriage. But amazement soon turned to dismay as he found himself catching up with another police carriage, chasing other villains three miles on from where he had first decided to scarper. Unfortunately he was recognised. Seconds later Jemmy found himself being yanked up by the curved handle of a brolly being used like a meat hook; he was immediately handcuffed and was soon on his way to the police cells. On another occasion he had dearly wished that all beer, gin and whisky were free to all. The very next day the newspapers – in very blurry print – reported that not only was the entire nation rotten drunk, but that every brewery and distillery had gone out of business as they were not able to keep up with demand.

"One thing, though, Jeremiah. I have had a lot of opposition to my coming to see you tonight. The Magic Council does not sanction the bringing in to our community of a known villain, especially as we have more than a few in our midst already. I must have your solemn promise that should you agree to come with me, that you are turning your back on a life of crime – now and forever," said the professor.

"Yus, guv," replied Jeremiah.

Jeremiah Miller was given lodgings, food, clothes and money to see him through the days ahead. Although he had a wife and five children, he took Professor Winch's advice and wrote them a letter to say he would send for them when the time was right. What Jemmy did not know was that his wife had had enough of a life of abject poverty, and had already run off with an acrobat from Cleethorpes, taking the children with her.

Jemmy kept his word to Professor Winch, and although the only employment he could get was rather low paid and menial in nature, he stuck to it. However, as he was bright and ambitious, he kept an eye out for opportunities to better himself. He noticed that similar to the ordinary world where he had spent most of his life up to then, there were still things that could be improved in the magic world – such as the regulation of new inventions.

He had made a friend since his arrival, one Raith Cornstone, another bright young lad hoping to make it big one day.

On more than one occasion, while sitting in the lounge of the Dead Cockerel on the Portobello Road, they experienced arguments between wizards who both claimed to have first thought of some new magic contraption. One such row resulted in one man, a policeman (or peeler, to the magic community) with arms two miles long, being admitted to seven hospitals at the same time. This was after claiming he had invented 'The long arm of the law' for apprehending otherwise out of reach criminals. The trouble was – another man said he had thought of it first. And so in the ensuing demonstrations which quickly became a heated argument, both spells to generate an extra two yards of human arm were then accidentally mixed up. In the confusion, the two yards became two miles, an ambulance

was called and the peeler was taken away. However, while the coachman drove the horse-drawn ambulance carefully along the road, his arm took that long to unravel he was able to bide his time playing darts. The fact that he couldn't see the dartboard made the man chuckle in the back of the ambulance, especially when he heard the barman yelling "OW!" very loudly as the long-armed peeler was driven away, or at least his head and body and one arm were, with his other arm due to follow some time later.

"This ain't no good, said Jemmy. "How many times 'ave we seen this 'appen? Eighteen? Nineteen times?"

"Twice, including just now," replied Raith.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Any'ow, we's gonna do summat abaht this, me 'ole mate!" announced Jemmy.

"Like what?" asked a sceptical Raith.

"Licences. That's wha', licences."

"I'm not quite with you, Jemmy. What do you mean, exactly?"

"You know – like's them ticketyboos the Council gizzez us a sayin' we can sell our fings. Only I'm gonna set meself up as the one givin' the ticketyboos out for new inventions. It'll stop all this nonsense for a start."

Raith was smiling. He liked Jemmy because he often belied his rough uneducated mien, and came out with some stunning ideas that more refined gents than he would loved to have thought of first.

"Rightyo, then! What do we do next?!" said an over-excited Raith.

"Firs', we needs a bit of cash. I finks I knows where I can get some, 'n' you do the same, 'n' I'll meet ya back 'ere – no, no' 'ere, too rough 'n' noisy. Make it the Flute and Firkin, that's always quiet, same time nex' week."

Unfortunately Jemmy's assessment of the unsatisfactory ambience for such important matters was spot on. Just as he had spoken – yet another row erupted over who had first invented everlasting coal. Raith strained his ears as the noise was tremendous and he thought he heard Jemmy say, the Lute and Gherkin. Raith thought for a moment, as this infamous hostelry was home to magic London's finest blaggers, but he decided that Jemmy must have had prior knowledge of a grand blag which would empty the pub for the evening. The Lute and Gherkin it was.

A week passed and Raith duly arrived at what he thought was the right public house. His stay there lasted less than three minutes, with his rapid removal not being of his own volition. The pub wasn't empty as Raith had presumed it would be, it was heaving. There was a police raid on after they had received a tip-off from an underworld snout in relation to a recent high-profile robbery. Total chaos ensued: there were peelers everywhere, whistling away like a vicar on holiday, nabbing anyone and everyone.

Raith was unceremoniously dragged off with the rest to the Portobello Road Night Court, and along with thirty-nine villains, was charged with the theft of diamonds, rubies and emeralds all belonging to the Maharaja of Goojabarati. He was found guilty and sentenced to a lifetime of penal servitude on the magic community's very own colonial island and Penal Colony –

Razamatazmania.

Jemmy turned up at the Flute and Firkin, on time and with Professor Winch in tow. He came along because he wanted to meet and talk with Jemmy's new associate.

"I'm sorry, Perfessor. I dunno wha's 'appened to old Raith. Maybe 'e ain't comin'."

Professor Winch furrowed his brow. Was this a wind up? Had Jemmy gone back to his old ways? But the professor was a gambler, in the right way and measure.

"Never mind, Jemmy, never mind. Fair enough, I will make up the shortfall to finance your idea. I will help you with the sharpest presentation possible when you, or rather, we, go in front of the Magic Initiatives Committee. Please answer their questions as clearly as possible. I can only intervene when I see fit to do so, and just as importantly, only when the committee allow me to. Agreed?"

"Agreed, Perfessor, 'n' fanks, no-one's ever trusted me before, you are a great man."

"Yes, well – great men don't have time to take their cloaks to the cleaners after some big lumbering oaf has blubbered all over them."

"Sorry."

The presentation was a great success. The Magic Initiatives Committee knew there was an increasing problem with directing the praise, as well as the rightful earnings, to the right person. They were immediately hooked on the rudiments of Jemmy's idea. These rudiments were honed and fine-tuned, of course, by the great Professor Winch. Licences, or even 'ticketyboos' as Jemmy would have called them, became patents, and 'the geezer givin' 'em out', became the Magic Patents Officer. The very first of which was none other than Jeremiah Miller – a twentieth generation Miller.

From then on, Jeremiah enjoyed many years of privilege and prosperity, but not so his old friend.

*

Raith, now a very old man, was still incarcerated on the Island of Razamatazmania. He did occasionally hear a snippet or two of news from home, and he certainly heard all about The poor boy made good, Jemmy Miller, who was the owner and proprietor of the Magic Patents Office of the Magical British Isles. If this wasn't bad enough for Raith to hear, the rest had him throwing up his gruel, far more than usual. Jemmy had also patented Patents Offices the whole world over. This meant that every time a new office was opened he would be paid royalties. It also meant that for each new invention that was patented by any patents office, he would make even more money.

More years passed. Raith was eventually granted parole on grounds of ill health and he immediately returned to London to stake his half claim in the Magic Patents Office. Sadly, by this time Jemmy had died – murdered – by a tall man with long black hair, and ruddy cheeks. . .

Just before the return of Raith, the death of Jeremiah Miller had brought an unexpected problem for the elders of the magic community to resolve. Jemmy, a twentieth generation Miller, was of course a bearer of the inherited magic powers of Merlin. But the nineteen generations to follow Jemmy, if the line survived, would be, as were the the previous nineteen generations, totally and utterly devoid of any magic powers. The precise problem here was, what were they to do about both the business and the huge profits the Magic Patents Office had generated and which no doubt would continue to do so? Were they to accept the disparity of a non-magic Miller getting a highly lucrative inheritance, a fortune created by magic in some respects, and under any other circumstances would never have been inherited by any person of non-magic status? After much high government wrangling, the answer was – no. It was unfortunate of course, but it could not be allowed. Shortly after this decision was made, the resolve of the Magic Council was put to the test.

This came in the form of an unusual occurrence, though not unheard of: a person without an ounce of magic in his body had found his way into the magic world – one Maximilian Miller – who duly announced that he was Jemmy's son. He seemed to know what a son of Jeremiah would know to satisfy the authorities, and gleefully rubbed his hands at the thought of his inheritance. Although Professor Winch was highly suspicious of this claim, his superiors in the Magic Council were satisified with the man's credentials, and knew that although the top prize as it were, would still have to be denied him, they came to the decision that Maximilian, as Jeremiah's legal heir, should get something.

As well as taking possession of all of Jeremiah's personal effects, and the funds in a bank account not deemed to have been accumulated via Patents Office dealings – a matter of a few thousand jupiters, Maximilian, although not now so smug as he had been upon his arrival, graciously accepted the offer of the stewardship of the Magic Patents Office, but only for as long as it took to find a new permanent proprietor.

Quite conveniently, the young man knew nothing whatsoever of Raith Cornstone, and the new steward if not owner, sent old Raith packing only minutes after he had arrived to stake his claim. Raith, not knowing of Professor Winch – who would indeed have helped him – sloped off a broken man. He went to live with his brother, Christopher Cornstone and his family, but died not long after, but not before telling his brother all about being cheated out of his share in the Magic Patents Office, and this became legend throughout the generations of Cornstones.

During Maximilian's stewardship, further legislation followed to ensure similar occurrences in the future would be handled with utmost expedience and efficiency (or so they hoped) – namely: only twentieth generation Millers, if one (or more, in the event of twins or even cousins) could be found of course, could inherit the outright ownership of the Magic Patents Office, with the proviso that non-magic Millers, which the Magic Council of course

limited to immediate issue, or in the simplest terms, children of the late proprietor, were to be tolerated and accommodated if possible, in some compensatory manner. But the ever practical Magic Council put in place one piece of legislation which would unwittingly spell the end of individual ownership of the Magic Patents Office and see it eventually become a Public Department. This little pearl of wisdom decreed that from the day of the owner's death, any twentieth generation Miller had one year to come forward and stake his or her claim. If no-one staked a claim within this time the business would be auctioned off and would go to the highest bidder, whether a member of the Miller family or not. Even more dramatically, it also meant that should this ever happen, the exclusivity of the proprietorship of the Magic Patents Office was lost to the Miller family for ever. Although the lawmakers did not think it would happen so soon if at all, their belief that the many strands of the Miller family would produce many twentieth generations but not all at the same time, resulting in there always being a qualifying member during the critical period, rather incredibly went totally awry almost immediately. The year passed. No qualifying member of the Miller family had come forward, and the ownership of the business passed into a stranger's hands – but thankfully not the huge profits already made in its comparatively short existence. It had been further decreed that this had to be reserved for the next magic member of the Miller family. Someone, someday would inherit the sum of over two-billion jupiters, the magic world's own unique currency – as well as over two-billion pounds sterling – and rising.

As for Maximilian, he simply muddled through and accepted the strange disparity – until his sudden disappearance shortly after his stewardship came to an end.

Scenes of Victorian London faded from Mike's mind as he fitfully slept on. Friday arrived. This was the day that Doctor Levin was to call again. A much refreshed Jack and Elsie got up, had breakfast, and decided to check on Mike. They peered around his door, and there was Mike sleeping soundly with his complexion as ruddy as it ever was after endless set-to's on the football pitch with Donaldo and his pals. They decided to phone the surgery to cancel the visit of Dr Levin, but for Mike, the strange dreams were not quite over. . .

16

Family Business

ALTHOUGH TO HIS PARENTS, Mike looked as if he was well on the mend, his mind was still full of vivid and sometimes disturbing images of the seemingly eternal and magical battle between good and evil, and sometimes the battle spilled over into the perfectly ordinary non-magic world.

In his dreams, Mike was now privy to the shock and horror experienced by an entire country, after listening to an historic yet extremely worrying announcement by the Prime Minister. . .

" . . . This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that, unless we hear from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany. . ."

Mike became witness to a domestic scene played out in the overwhelming majority of British homes on that tragic morning. This centred on the typical British suburban lounge, with the wavy teak art deco 1930s radio on the sideboard acting as the focal point for the shocked faces gathered round: family men in plain brown suits, sons with side parts and v-shaped vertically striped woollen tank-tops, the ladies of the house in broad-shouldered floral patterned frocks – and toothless gran fast asleep in her rocking chair, (she never liked that Mr Chamberlain anyway, too wishy-washy).

"That's it, then," said the stoic Tommy Atkins, now standing to the side of the fireplace, thumbs through the buttonholes of his lapels, looking grimly at his kinfolk gathered. "We got through the last lot, we'll just 'ave to roll our sleeves up and do it all again. Ee, put kettle on, Mother. . ."

The typical and later-to-be iconic images of such Britain-Stands-Alone stoicism faded from Mike's mind in a grey mist.

But all was not over yet. The mist cleared once more. Mike dreamed on. . .

It was 1939. Lord Jules Tunstall – the only child of old Wallace – arrived back at Stanneyfield Grange, a large private estate and manor house in the county of Berkshire. He was a very thin, grey haired and even grey-faced old man. He walked with a stoop and a stick, but even then he still needed help. He had been to visit friends close by to discuss the terrible news which had shocked the whole nation.

Although of magic heritage, he lived his life in both worlds, but as the

years had gone by both had become so familiar to him he often found it hard to distinguish one from the other, but the professor's life seemed to him to have been nothing but tragedy after tragedy, despite the wealth and privilege amassed over many, many years. His wife had died not long after giving birth to their third child, the third of three daughters. The three girls grew up, married and had children of their own. Tragically, not long after the marriage of his youngest daughter, an attack by the dread enemies of the magic community – Professor Zenith and his followers, The League of Mordred – had left most of the family dead.

The old man had lived on, because on the day of the attack he had gone out to visit friends and had taken two of his grandchildren with him.

He returned home to find a heart-crushing scene of total carnage. He also found that Zenith had left behind a little note wrapped around a silver snuffbox with the initials, *'WT'*, engraved on its lid. The note read: – *'Revenge is Sweet'*. This left Lord Tunstall on his own to bring up his only two remaining grandchildren. These were Joshua Beecham and Ezekiel Creek.

The two boys delighted their grandfather with their willingness in their studies; although Josh was not that bright he nevertheless tried his best. They also helped him in whatever way they could, and even wrote his letters for him when he was not feeling too well. Old man Tunstall was broken-hearted when both beloved grandsons left to attend the University of Abracadrystwyth, but they came back during the holidays and even carried out many duties around the estate which would normally have attracted payment, but they steadfastly refused any offer made by their beloved grandad. The old man knew that he would pay them some day, even if it was after he was gone.

Josh and Ezekiel, along with the only other survivor of Zenith's murderous attack, an uncle by marriage of Ezekiel's, called Edwin Cornstone – had been the only three major beneficiaries in the old man's will. There had been one clause in the will, however. Old man Tunstall was of the old school: honour and integrity were of paramount importance to him and he had made it a condition of his will that his beneficiaries had to uphold these ideals. If any of the three brought shame upon the family in any way, they would be disinherited.

Although a Professor of Magic, Jules Tunstall had been such a successful businessman in the ordinary world, that he was made a lord – a viscount, and was given the Stanneyfield Grange estate in Berkshire with ten-thousand acres of prime arable land.

The Rolls Royce crunched to a halt at the end of the seashell covered driveway. Kimmance, the chauffeur, got out and opened the car door for his Lordship.

"Thank you, Raymond, what a day for a war! Huh!" lamented Lord Tunstall, as he unsteadily placed his right foot on the gravel path.

With a little help from a chambermaid and a footman, the old man was helped into his home and was taken through to the drawing room and was

eased down onto on a large leather armchair. A blanket was placed over his lap.

"You won't forget my usual, will you now, Lottie?" said Lord Tunstall with a wink to his favourite servant. Lottie curtsied and smiled, and went off to prepare a large pink gin.

The old man thanked the rest of his helpers but then bade them to leave, as he liked to ensure he was alone and undisturbed whenever he read the morning mail.

Most of the correspondii he received that day were polite letters of thanks from grateful trustees of various charitable organisations, but the last one was not. Lord Tunstall stared at it, reluctant to read what he feared could only be bad news.

He sighed – carefully sliced the letter open – and read:

'SEPTEMBER 3 1939

My Dear Jules,

It pains me to write these grave tidings to such a man as yourself. Indeed, if it were not for your frequent and liberal help on many occasions over many years, neither I nor my junior partners would still be in business. In respect of such selflessness and generosity, the irony of what I am about to ask of you does not escape me, and indeed it is with a heavy heart that I must do so.

As you know, we went to great lengths some years ago, to not only ensure the protection and maintenance of your then considerable fortune as well as your entire estate, both fiscal and realty, magic and ordinary – but to strengthen it and to provide you and the future generations of your family with long-term financial security. For many years, as I'm sure you will agree, this indeed has been the case, but who could have foreseen such a disaster as has struck both the entire magic and non-magic worlds? It seemed – not so long ago – that the investing of your entire fortune in Anglo-German Dictionaries was a runaway success – but now? I will not iterate the painfully obvious reasons as to how and why things have changed, but with the greatest of reluctance I do have to explain to you the severity of the repercussions upon your good self.

With the full assent of the Magic Council, although Mr Mainbrace did state his deep regret, I attended a meeting with His Majesty's Government from which I have not long returned. While there, I pleaded with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and of course, the Trade Secretary, but it was to no avail. My pleas were met with exactly the same regretful response as that which I received from our own community: their demand that all commerce and trade with Germany was to cease with immediate effect, was to be upheld without exception. I even pointed out the efficacy of continuing production for our troops – especially secret agents, but I was informed that

this matter had already been solved and that the country's existing stocks of all dual dictionaries would have to suffice with regard to such military demand – and that not one single new copy was to be produced while hostilities continue. This was twenty minutes ago. However, ten minutes ago, I received the terrible news that your own company, Tunstall Publishing, is now worthless. It now owes the government thirty-five million pounds sterling and rising, in unpaid duties, levies and taxes. As your magic fortune has always kept parity with sterling, and as the exchange rate is as ever, one for one, I am very sorry to have to tell you that you now also owe our own Revenue Department the sum of thirty-five million jupiters. As for the delicate matter of attempting to recover these monies, I am sure you will appreciate that one must do what one can, and not be overly sensitive in certain areas.

On behalf of the junior partners and myself, I can assure you it gives us no pleasure at all to inform you that we submitted tenders to both the Magic Council and His Majesty's Government to propose our acting as the recovery agents from the estate of your good self. Why tolerate cold hearted strangers who would not and could not care less about the friendship and dignity of such a man as yourself? I hope you will agree that it is far better for someone you are familiar with to deal with such delicate matters concerning your future welfare. I have to further inform you that our tenders were successful.

If, based upon our many years of friendship, I can be candid with you, then, I am supposedly to first of all enquire of you whether you currently have the means – either in money or valued property – to pay the full amount of all that is owing. Obviously I have been privy to all of your financial affairs and I know that this is not the case. Therefore you will I am sure, be glad to hear that I have already informed His Majesty's Government that they will not receive the full amount owing and will have to accept what monies can be raised from liquefied assets. I am sure that they and our own Council will agree to this. I am equally sure that you are now fully aware of the gravity of your situation. I therefore have no other option but to inform you that Stanneyfield Grange, as well as any other properties you own and any monies you have either in cash or in bank accounts, will be seized immediately.

I am confident that there should be no problem in allowing you a period of grace to make alternative arrangements. Shall we say, three days?

Once again, I offer you my deepest sympathies at such a difficult time. I hope that one day we will be able to be of service to you again.

Your Servant

H. Coyle

Hilton Coyle, Senior Accountant
Coyle, Byrne, Mercer & May – Accountants'

The letter wafted out of the old man's hand and down onto the floor. The old man was dead.

A few days later there was a meeting in the offices of May, Mercer, Byrne & Coyle – Probate Lawyers. It was to discuss the winding up of the magic portion of Lord Tunstall's estate. Seated around the table were three men. These were Joshua Beecham and Ezekiel Creek, the only family members left – and Edwin Cornstone, or more accurately, Professor Cornstone. Edwin had become an expert in both ordinary and Magic-Sciences.

The meeting lasted all of eight minutes. The three men left with nothing. The men were told that if they argued and tried to challenge their decision in court, they would then be cited as present owners of the estate as per the original provisions of the will – and have the shortfall of twenty-one million jupiters owing to the Magic Council – levied against them. For good measure, they would also try to set in motion the re-levying against the three, of the formerly written-off debt in sterling as well.

Joshua Beecham nodded to his cousin Ezekiel as they walked out onto the busy London street. He did not expect any sort of gesture in reply, which was just as well, because there wasn't one. Josh, and his cousin and one time friend – Ezekiel Creek, had not spoken voluntarily to each other since serving in the military together many years earlier, during which a monumental misunderstanding between them had driven them both apart.

Edwin just grimaced at both men. He happened to be Ezekiel's former uncle by marriage. Like the two cousins, he had also served in the same branches of the armed and secret services but he, too, had not spoken willingly to either of the men since their grandfather's death.

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Edwin Cornstone, descendant of Raith – had had one last chance to reclaim at least some of his family's promised fortune. Shortly before old man Tunstall's demise, the Magic Patents Office was again on the market, due to its then proprietor, Otto Von Strudelberger-Miller, declaring that he thought it best to return to his country of origin – Scotland. Edwin read about this in the *'Magic Times'*, and as there did not appear to be any magic Millers on the scene to restake their own claim, decided to mount a bid himself. Professor Cornstone went to see his ex-father-in-law. This was to ask for financial help to mount the highest bid possible to try and obtain the Magic Patents Office. He walked into the drawing room, and found him dead in his leather armchair. A letter had fallen to the floor. Edwin Cornstone angrily, although totally unfairly, heaped the blame on both Ezekiel and Josh for not doing enough to prevent the loss of their grandfather's estate.

Although the death of Jules Tunstall was tragic, it was perhaps as well that Edwin Cornstone was not able to proceed with a bid for the Magic Patents Office. Things were changing. The passing of the Magic Patents Office into strangers' hands eventually became a thorn in the side of the Magic Council. As well as discovering some financial irregularities, they had not intended it

to be the sole property of the one family, generation to generation, but rather to put its proprietorship out to tender upon the demise of each incumbent administrator. After allowing things to stand as they were for over a century, the Magic Council eventually had had enough of arguing with the families of those who had passed on over the prospect of their losing everything; they were also seriously worried about infiltration by enemy agents. The result was an urgent drafting and speedy ratification of further draconian legislation. Shortly after these new laws had been passed, the Magic Patents Office became an agency of the Magic Council.

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After the fruitless appointment with the money men, Josh went off home, which for a long time had not been Stanneyfield Grange.

Although he had been brought up in Thornton, a small suburb of Liverpool, he was never to return there for decades, instead moving in with his grandfather, and then going to live with an aunt by marriage, his beloved Aunt Hattie. This was his late father's sister-in-law who had been widowed at an early age and had never remarried. She lived on her own in a small, rundown cottage in a Devonshire village called Magicombe. After she had heard of the tension between the two cousins after their service careers had ended, she had offered to take Josh in. Upon seeing an escape route from the endless rows and suspicions, Josh had immediately accepted.

Upon arriving back from his wasted trip to the Smoke, Josh found his aunt sitting on an armchair, knitting, but she seemed to keep changing her facial expression from that of sorrow to that of hidden excitement – as if she had a surprise in store. Curiosity got the better of Josh.

"Er – anything wrong, Auntie?" asked Josh.

"No, Josh, more sad than wrong, although there's some good news as well. But I don't know whether this is the right time to tell you about it.

"I'm all right, Auntie, could do with cheering up. What is it?"

"Do you remember me mentioning a cousin of mine, Alphonso Grubb?"

"Yeah, just about. Why, is he coming for a visit or something?"

"I hope not. He's dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Auntie, that's terrible."

"Yes, it is, I suppose, but he was a hundred and eighty-six."

"Er – what's the good news?" asked a confused Josh.

"He's left his entire fortune to me – US! And I know exactly what we are going to do with it!"

"It's your money, Auntie, don't waste it on me. I'll only spend it."

"And that is precisely why I'm going to go into business!"

"What sort of business?!" asked Josh, who had never considered his aunt to be any sort of business person whatsoever.

"A sweetshop! In Hemlock Village!" came the excited reply.

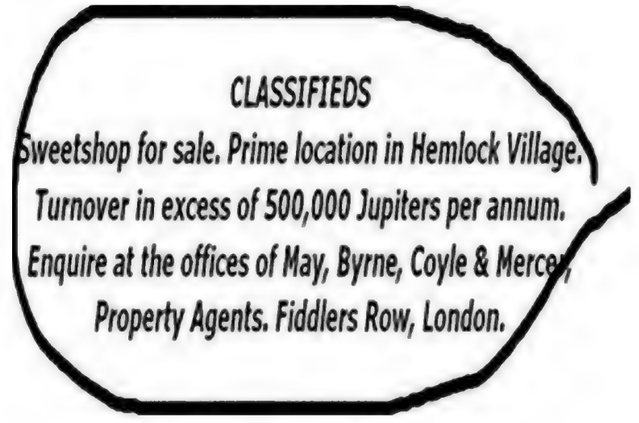
"A sweetshop! A sweetshop!" exclaimed Josh, who didn't know what else to say.

"A sweetshop, Josh! A sweetshop!" Aunt Hattie thrust the newspaper she

had been reading right into Josh's face. "Read that!"

"East Anglian man claims to be the real Father Christmas!" spluttered Josh. "You've not been on the turps again, have you?!"

"Of course not! Here!" Aunt Hattie took back the paper, folded it, circled off the classified advert with a pen and handed it back to Josh, who could then read the right article.


CLASSIFIEDS
Sweetshop for sale. Prime location in Hemlock Village.
Turnover in excess of 500,000 Jupiters per annum.
Enquire at the offices of May, Byrne, Coyle & Mercer,
Property Agents. Fiddlers Row, London.

"If you have nothing else to do, you're coming with me!"

"Er – Auntie, there's something I should tell you, that firm sounds the same—"

"Now now, Josh, you're not going to let your poor old aunt risk getting attacked by lord knows who in a strange area, are you?!"

"I'll get my coat," said a resigned Josh.

Later on, just as the clerk decided to close for the day, Hattie Beecham and her sheepish looking nephew, walked into the offices of May, Byrne, Coyle and Mercer. Perseus May, a pale-faced shrewd looking man with tufts of ginger hair around his otherwise bald head and wearing round glasses, spotted Josh straightaway.

"Hello again, Mr Beecham, I am rather surprised to see you back here as you must surely have realised that we cannot change our position – er – formidable aunts notwithstanding. There was, still is, considerable debt. Please accept the fact that we have been good enough to arrange for it to be written off, and—"

"He's not here for that, you tight-arsed scum-bag!" yelled an extremely angry Aunt Hattie, who did not seem in the least bit disadvantaged should an attacker appear out of a dark alleyway. She banged her brolly hard down on the table several times as she stated her business. "Here! I'm buying that! And quick about it!" shouted Hattie, as she placed the newspaper on the

desk. May gave it a quick glance and saw the circle around the shop advert.

"Excuse me, Madam, but what on earth do you mean by that? We already have several interested parties and I'm quite sure that one of them will snap it up! So, if you plea– OW! OW! OW!"

There is no such thing as can't, won't, mightn't, too late, it's gone, sold, or even hard luck to an Aunt Hattie Beecham on the offensive.

"Very well, Madam, I will add your name to the list. When can you view?"

"Now!" came the immediate answer.

"Er – it's a bit late, and I'm not too sure if— OW! OW! OW! OW! All right! I'll get my coat."

All three left the office, but all three were spotted by both Ezekiel Creek, who just happened to be retracing his steps after losing his wallet – and Professor Cornstone, who at the same time co-incidentally staggered out of the public house on the corner. Both men hid behind doorways and could easily hear a very loud Aunt Hattie.

"I've told you before, Josh, you've got to be strong to get anything out of anyone. Those money-men are no match for me. Give your old Aunt Hattie a kiss, cos she has just set you up for life as you should have been already."

Josh looked around. The money-man, although smirking, was diplomatically looking the other way. Josh, thinking that no-one else could see them, lightly pecked his Aunt Hattie on the cheek.

Ezekiel and Edwin were fuming. In their minds, Josh had taken a demented and most probably highly dangerous relative to force the money-men to cough up a share of the fortune – possibly their shares as well.

As soon as Josh and his Aunt Hattie were out of sight, both men rushed across the cobbled street. After giving each other a brief look of surprise, they both banged on the doors of the offices until it was finally opened several minutes later. They were seen to by a small fat man, totally bald, with a big round fat face. This was one of the junior partners, Sephton Mercer, and he gave them a smug, knowing smile as he asked them to sit. After listening to their ranting and raving for what seemed an age, Sephton Mercer just sat there, his hands behind his head, smiling at them.

"Well?! Haven't you got anything to say at all?!" demanded Edwin.

"No, sirs, I have not, other than to inform you that each and every one of our clients are entitled to– and get – complete confidentiality . . . you yourselves are entitled to the very same."

"But that was Beecham!" pleaded Ezekiel. "Are you trying to tell us that bringing his psychopathic aunt of his back here had nothing to do with Grandfather's estate?!"

"I am not saying any such thing, Mr Creek. I am saying that whatever they chose to discuss with my partner has nothing to do with either of you. Now I really must ask you to leave as we are well past our usual closing time."

"I'm not leaving!" protested Ezekiel, and folded his arms. "Nor am I!" added Edwin.

"Goodnight, gents. Watch out for the guard dragon."

Ezekiel and Edwin departed, rather quickly.

For a long, long time after, Professor Cornstone was an unpleasant man for anyone to behold and to listen to. Nor did he reserve his anger just for his former kinfolk. The sorry tale of what the Miller family had supposedly denied his was not reserved for the perceived original transgressors but carried over in true vendetta style; woebetide any scions of the family Miller who crossed his path. Professor Winch, who eventually heard the whole sorry saga, helped Edwin as much as he could by giving him a teaching post at a highly prestigious magic school – Hemlock Hall – the same school at which Professor Winch was the headmaster.

Ezekiel Creek was more resilient. After his grandfather's death and loss of the estate, he shrugged off the losing of his fortune, settled in London, worked hard at his chosen profession of teaching, and he, too, eventually wound up at the school. He eventually made deputy head and became a good friend of the headmaster. Ezekiel, although surprised to find his former uncle among the staff, did not feel any hatred towards him, despite Edwin seeming to hate him, but he still hated his cousin Josh Beecham with all the hate he could muster. Josh could feel nothing but equal resentment in return, purely because of the way he was treated by Ezekiel Creek, in private at least – and by Professor Cornstone, in public as well as private.

Once all three had found themselves within the same community again, Professor Winch acted fast to diffuse any problems, or, perhaps, to be realistic, to keep the lid on social and family problems and differences and misunderstandings as best he could. He called a meeting between all three feudees and told them that they must do their best to *TRY* and forget their differences for the good of the school and their local community. With reservation and reluctance they eventually agreed to this, although all were secretly thankful that the knowing Professor Winch had made 'try' the operative word.

Mike's nocturnal journey from the dark ages through the colonial elegance of Victorian drawing rooms, and on to wartime London and up to more recent times – was at an end. Such images finally left Mike's mind and he went into a much needed and dreamless deep sleep.

17

A Caged Bird

IT WAS 2:30 P.M. and Jack and Elsie were regretting cancelling the visit from Doctor Levin and were wondering and worrying as to what their next move should be. As they glanced down at Mike, he opened his eyes, smiled, and then sat bolt upright.

"I'm starving! Is breakfast ready?"

For the first time in her life, Elsie Miller was overjoyed to be cooking a full fry-up for her lazy-bones of a son in the middle of the afternoon.

Later on that day, Noah Marchment breathed a sigh of relief as he was hastily substituted upon the beleaguered Bedazzlers espying Mike, rushing through the park and pulling his football jersey on as he sped along. Noah, now on his way home, did not think it at all fair to take abuse not only from Brazil but from his own teammates.

The Barnswick Bedazzlers quickly recovered from being eighteen-nil down and won the game one-hundred and twenty-seven to nineteen. Brazil's nineteenth goal came courtesy of Donaldo moving Greasy's jersey ten feet further out while the others weren't looking.

*

The summer holidays were rapidly coming to an end. Some school children dread going back to school, while others just can't wait. No doubt the enthusiasm of the latter category is due to not only liking school, but, perhaps, getting very bored in the holidays. A few, just a few school children, have the best of both worlds. They make the most of every single minute of their spare time in the holidays, and as the last of the pale summer sun leaves earlier each day towards the end of August, they really look forward to going back to school. Mike Miller was one such person.

After having his last meal of the summer holidays at home, Mike left the dining table and told his parents that he was going to pack. He wasn't sure, but to Mike they both seemed a little nervous and gave Mike an awkward look. He dismissed this as just reluctance to let go.

This had been very noticeable at the end of each holiday period during his first couple of years, but had lessened since, but for some unknown reason his folks had done some sort of emotional U-turn. Mike thought no more on this as he reached the foot of the stairs. He took one step up, only to get the fright of his life.

"Mike."

"EH?! Blinkin' 'eck, Dad! What are you sneaking up on me for?!"

"Sorry, son, didn't mean to, but, er – here's a letter from the school, you'd better read it."

A puzzled Mike took the letter and was going to open it and read it right there and then.

"Oh – er – no, son, take it upstairs. You're a big lad now, you don't want your mum and dad reading all your letters and stuff, do you?"

"Er – yeah, OK," said an even more puzzled Mike, who really couldn't care less if his parents read his letters or not. He went upstairs, flopped onto the bed and was about to read his letter, when he thought he heard the car door slam. He rushed to the window and just about caught sight of his parents roaring off in the car to lord knows where.

He lay back for a few minutes, mused over what was going on, decided that it was probably some last minute shopping, perhaps for his trip back to school – and finally read his letter – what there was of it.

Apart from the embossed school crest at the top right of the notepaper, the only other writing was right in the middle of the page, no formal address, not even a cheery greeting from the school secretary. This seemed strange to Mike, because after witnessing over four years of what he thought of as near insanity, although always hilarious and without serious consequences, Mike had come to think of Jacinta Morse as the friendly nutcase.

Mike began to read these sparing few words.

At first he read it the way one would read any typical letter, but very quickly Mike realised it was something more; it was verse, or a poem.

It read:

'The one who speaks but does not know,
Will know the way for you to go.
But only if you know to ask,
Where to my friend, for me, today.
When this be done, be packed, be gone,
Then say three times, mouth clear and wide,
'I've passed the test, now where's my ride?''

And that was it. Mike read and reread the verse again and again. He turned over the page in the hope there would be some clue as to what on earth was going on – nothing, it was blank.

For a second or two he thought it could be Jacinta Morse, larking about. However, Mike thought that as nutty as she was, she was still a highly efficient and hardworking member of staff and surely wouldn't risk the sack by pulling stunts like this.

But what about Mr Titherley? He could easily be a strange, male clone version of Jacinta, but Mike decided that neither would he risk a lifetime's career.

Mike thought of his parents: the awkward looks, and their dashing out of the house and driving off at high-speed. Mike wasn't at all sure, but he felt as if his mum and dad knew something about all this and he was going to wait for them to return and ask them straight out. He went downstairs and

waited – and waited – and waited. . .

It was nearly midnight and he began to get a little worried. He looked at the letter again and reread the verse. He had a thought: people do not do things without reason so concluded that there must be a reason for this verse, but what? 'I wonder if it's telling me to do something' he said out loud.

But Mike then thought he heard a noise – something moving, but very quietly. "Who's there?" shouted Mike. "Mum? Dad?" Complete silence.

Mike then heard the unmistakeable sound of cats fighting outside. He breathed a sigh of relief, smiled to himself and went back to his musing. He read the first line of the verse again – and again this was out loud. 'The one who speaks but does not know?' I wonder who on earth that is?" said Mike. Again, this was followed by a barely audible muffled sound, but this time Mike knew it was from inside the house – somewhere.

Mike was quite brave for his age, but even he did not like being at a disadvantage of not knowing who or what was lurking in the shadows. Nevertheless, he rose from the settee and walked across to the partition which separated the front and rear lounges. He slowly and quietly slid the partition back and peered in. There he saw and heard again the source of the nocturnal disturbance.

"Phew, the budgie, it was just the budgie," sighed a relieved Mike. He went back into the rear lounge and sat down. He looked at the second line of the verse and again read it out loud. "Will know the way for you to g— WE HAVEN'T GOT A BUDGIE!"

"Bloody well get one, then, and let me get some kip!" shouted back his next door neighbour, who needed an early night and a good sleep as he was up at 5:00 a.m.

Mike ran back into the front lounge; this was just to make sure he hadn't been seeing things. He certainly had been seeing things, but that's because they were there. Yes, there was a budgerigar, sitting on a little swing in a cage, twittering away.

Mike just stood there open mouthed. One thing his parents had always denied Mike and that was a pet of any kind. His mum said it was because of her asthma and his dad said it was because of her asthma. But there, right in front of him, was a little yellow and green budgerigar. Mike shook his head; he didn't know what to think. He shook his head once more, returned to the settee in the rear lounge, and recommenced his deciphering of a very strange poem. He continued:

". . . But only if you know to ask, where to my friend, for me, today?"

"Bucharest."

Mike again shot out of his seat.

"Who said that?! Who spoke?! Stop messing about will you? Is that you, Greasy? Well it ain't funny!"

No-one replied. Mike had definitely heard someone say, "Bucharest", but who? And why?

Mike, despite being thought of as a big strong lad, decided he didn't like being on his own late at night and unashamedly wished his parents would come home.

Once again he went back to the poem. This time he read it out loud from start to finish.

". . . Bucharest."

"That's it! I'm calling the poli'— no! It couldn't be!"

Mike had the most amazing thought. The budgie! The budgie was telling him the answer to the riddle – the poem – or was it? He stood there for a moment in thought. He was actually formulating a damage limitation plan. If he was totally wrong, then who would know he had tried to ask a budgerigar the answer to a riddle? No-one. He made his mind up. He was going to ask the budgie.

Mike picked up the letter and walked into the front lounge and over to the cage in the corner. He coughed to clear his throat and looked rather foolishly at the budgerigar, still just merrily swinging away. Mike decided not to recite the whole poem, just the line about 'where to'. "Er – where to my friend, for me today?"

Mike felt very foolish indeed. For a few seconds nothing happened at all. Mike continued to just stare at the budgerigar, while the budgerigar continued to just swing and twitter.

Mike was just about to turn away when the budgie suddenly stopped – very slowly turned his head around to face Mike – stopped again – opened his beak – and said very clearly – "Bucharest". Mike jumped back in fright. He knew that budgerigars could talk, but this was like something from a horror film. Mike just stood there, frozen to the spot, unable to say or do anything.

There then came a voice he had got to know so well over the past four years or so, and was so very glad to hear it right now. The strange thing was, the voice was talking through the budgerigar.

"Ah, young Mr Miller! You've come through at last. Not too much of a strain, I hope. . . ?"

"Er – no, Headmaster, I'm OK," lied Mike, and feeling even more foolish through having a perfectly ordinary everyday conversation with a strange budgerigar, but whose voice he recognised as that belonging to Professor Winch, headmaster of Hemlock Hall.

The voice continued: "I'm going to say well done to you, Michael, and here's why: as part of fifth year studies, we send the most resourceful and hardy students away for what ordinary folk would call a year out, or work experience. It's not just you, Michael, we have done this for many fifth year students for many years now. When I'm in a grand mood I could even say it was a Sabbatical – but I'm not – so I won't!"

Mike was bemused. "A year out? Subbuteo? What do you mean?"

The professor stifled a laugh. "Sabbatical, Michael! Why do you think I

don't say it that often?! It starts with a test to see who we can send out to the wide and often wild wizard world, to learn new skills and to find and train the leaders of the future. I begin by setting a little test – a poem – but with a hidden message. Only those that solve this little puzzle pass the test and are invited to go on the Sabbatical . . . you, Michael, have passed this test.

"Although the families and older children know of this annual event, they are sworn to secrecy. So, Michael, well done again! Please pack your things and don't forget the last part of the poem. You are indeed off to Bucharest in Romania. Good luck!"

The voice was gone, but even more strangely, so was the budgerigar. Although not really wishing to leave the house for who knows how long and without saying goodbye to his parents, Mike came to the conclusion that his mum and dad must have been informed by the school about these strange goings on. Maybe they had been told it was advisable for them to be out of the house until Mike was either on his way to a new adventure in a foreign land – or in the event of not passing the test – on his way back to school.

Mike went up to his room, packed his case for his journey into the unknown, went back downstairs, picked up his letter, and read the last three lines of the verse:

"I've passed the test, now where's my ride? I've passed the test, now where's my ride? I've passed the test, now where's my ride?"

Almost immediately came a huge knock on the door. The shock left Mike unable to react, but only for a moment or two. He dashed to the window, peered through the curtains, and standing on the porch was a small, thin man in a long overcoat, holding a lantern. Mike could just see his face, and the best he could make of it was that the man was rather rough looking.

What was more amazing was that standing in the street was an old fashioned tinker's caravan, pulled by a huge shire horse which currently had its mouth in a huge bagful of oats.

An angry shout through the letterbox shook Mike out of his musing and wonderment.

"'Ere! You in there! If this 'ere's Mike Miller's 'ouse, then gerra move on, I ain' gorrall night!"

"Coming!" shouted Mike and off he went to start his year-long Sabbatical.

18

Wimpole's Magic Caravan

AS IT WAS NIGHT-TIME and as the street lights only gave off a pale orange glow, Mike couldn't really make out what the outside of the tinker's caravan was like.

The man carrying the lantern led Mike to the rear of the caravan where there was a little set of steps. "Up ya git, young fella," said the man.

Mike Miller climbed up and walked onto, or rather into this rather strange mode of transport for a trip to Bucharest.

Although Mike had never been inside a caravan of this type before, he had seen something similar in books and on the television. He was expecting it to be a very cramped affair where more priority was given to the safe storing of pots and pans along both inner walls of the caravan, rather than it being anywhere near suitable to sit, let alone trying to sleep. How wrong he was. First of all, the inside was very definitely far bigger, higher, wider and so on than seemed possible from the outside, and the interior was very lavish. Despite Mike being wrong over what he had expected to see, the honest truth was that such things were no longer a surprise.

He was not surprised that the wide room that seemed so geometrically impossible to exist, did so. He was not surprised that there was oak panelling all around. He was not surprised that there was an oak table in the middle of the caravan. He was not surprised to find a bookcase and vending machines along the walls. Nor was he surprised at the opening in one of the wall panels, allowing him to see out, and presumably for it to double up as a Magivision screen.

Mike put his bag down on the table and sat down, looking at his tinkerish but familiar looking host a little awkwardly. Barry was actually Baz the coach driver from his journeys home during the holidays, but Mike was never to make the connection, and Baz or Barry was never going to offer up insight as to his being one and the same person.

The caravaneer felt the awkwardness and commenced trying to break the ice.

"'Ello, young fella, I'm Barry – Barry Wimpole – 'ere, gizz ya bag," said Barry with a smile. After shaking hands, Barry picked up Mike's bag and put it in a little cupboard next to the bookshelf. Beyond was the cab, and, presumably, was where another tinker sat and controlled the horse, so Mike thought.

Barry sat to the side of Mike – smiled, leaned over, pulled on a cord which made a bell ring – and Mike heard the distinct clippety-clop of a horse trotting along.

"I fink, m'lad, we'll 'ave a little birra supp'— blinkin' 'eck, I forgot! Is'e suppose'd ta pick up fish and chips for the Mrs!"

Barry reached out again and dinged on the bell. The horse stopped, causing just a minor judder, and Barry leapt out while Mike just sat there wondering what on earth was going on. A few minutes later, Barry was back with his wife's supper, which he also stored in the cupboard. He dinged the bell again, and off they went.

"Fancy a fry-up?" asked Barry.

Mike, although not that hungry as he had enjoyed a big tea, did like his fry-ups. Mike gladly accepted the offer. Barry went to the vending machine, pressed one button for a meal, one for a drink, and then pressed another button which was for how many servings. He lifted two trays out, upon which were plates of sizzling bacon, fried eggs, a heap of sausages, baked beans, black pudding, mushrooms and tomatoes – and to the side, two huge mugs of steaming hot sweet tea. How even a magic vending machine knew how he liked his eggs and how many sugars in his tea flummoxed Mike, but so did something else.

"If this machine does every meal you can think of, why did you get off to go to the chip shop?" asked Mike of Barry Wimpole.

"Yeah, you'd fink I'd be able to get me fish and chips from it, wouldn't yer? But the fing is, whichever numskum did the spells fer this gizmo, sort 'a' go' mixed up."

"Mixed up!" spluttered Mike, worrying as to whether his sausages and eggs really were sausages and eggs.

"Oh flippin' 'eck! Shouldna said nowt!" roared Barry, but just as he saw Mike go to spit the lot out, he quickly explained.

"Nah, it's OK, young fella, fish 'n' chips is the only fing it can't do, so I's gets off and goes to some nice little chippy in Brighton – smashin' swag."

"But what does it do if you do ask for fish and chips?" asked a curious Mike.

"Oh blinkin' 'eck! Don't! Don't!" cried Barry, while laughing and holding his sides over some particularly crazy memory.

"Why, what's up?!" asked Mike.

"Oh dear, phew!" said Barry, calming down again. "The las' time tha' 'appened, a giant octypus suddenly appeared and squashed the livin' daylights out of the lorrovus! Bu' norronly tha', one of 'is long, rubbery feeler fings—"

"Tentacles," interjected Mike.

"Oo – I dunno about that – but any'ow – it reaches fru the door, grabs Fred – lifts 'im up in the air and bashes 'is 'ead up and dahn on the road. This frightened the life aht a poor Ned, an' we wen' faster and faster – and poor Fred got bashed even more."

"But surely Fred – er – Ned's not a real horse?" asked Mike, thinking it was a wind up.

"Not now 'e ain't! Poor fing could never work again, so we 'ad to fink o'

sumfink. Oh flippin' 'eck! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh stop, please stop – ho ho ho ho ho ho! Oo, phew! Oh, that's better. Pheew!"

Barry mopped his head with his handkerchief and rubbed his aching sides.

"You're a right comedian you are, young fella, givin' ole Barry a start like that!"

Mike, who had only asked about fish and chips, diplomatically smiled and recommenced his meal. He asked Barry about the caravan, and although he was polite as he could be, put it to Barry that a journey to Bucharest in a caravan did not seem that good an idea, even if they were magic folk.

Barry laughed loudly. Again.

"This ain't any 'ole caravan, m'lad. Welcome aboard, lad – ta Wimpole's Magic Caravan – Barry Wimpole at your service – Magic Travel Specialist and Warrant Holder to none uvver than the Magic Mayor of the British Isles 'n' 'is entire Magic Council. Anyway, c'mon, lad – eat up – yuse looks discumstarverated."

Mike, recognising the friendly way of being told not to ask any more questions, and as he was very discumstarverated – well, he wasn't really but the grub was excellent – kept quiet and returned to his meal.

A few minutes later, Mike heard a noise from behind a curtain to the right of the caravan at the cabin end. He looked over expecting the driver to come in and stop for a cuppa or a bite to eat. Instead, a kindly-faced, portly old gentleman with a shock of wavy black hair struggled through and over to the sitting area.

"Oh good! Another traveller. Pleased to meet you, young fellow, pleased to meet you."

The old man looked to Barry, gesturing to be introduced. Barry smiled.

"'Ere, Mike. I'se like ya t' meet one o' the bestest, clevereverest 'n' kin'liest wizards in the 'ole wide worl'. Mike Miller, meet Perfessor Aloysius Pendragon – boss 'istorian o' the Univarsity o' Abracadrystwyth! That's Welsh, y' know."

Professor Pendragon spoke softly back to Barry.

"Er – Barry, not that I'm offended, far from it – but it's *Chief* Historian. The word 'boss' nowadays is taken to mean the best. As my title is not meant for such greatness to be inferred, I'm just a little embarrassed when others make it seem as if it is so. Alas, such is the modern idiom, but no matter. Hello, young Mr Miller, I'm so very pleased to meet you."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Professor," replied Mike, and stood up to shake his hand.

"May I sit down?" asked the professor. "I'se – er – I'd really like to have a chat with you, these caravan journeys can be so tedious without another intell– er – passenger to talk to."

"Er – yes, no problem, Professor," replied Mike, a little awkwardly. As the two sat down at the table, the driver, one Fred Marsh, came through from the cab, muttering as he did so.

"Old Ned knows the way all right, time for some grub and some nice hot char. Oh hello!" said Fred, surprised to see Mike sitting there. He'd forgotten

about picking Mike up, as his navigation duties always kept him a busy man.

"Michael, please meet the best long-distance coachman this magic land of ours has ever seen. Fred Marsh, meet Michael Miller, he's a Hemlock Hall lad, you know."

Fred shook Mike's hand, smiled, and sat at the table.

"How's tricks, Professor?" asked Fred.

"Fine, Fred, just fine. You?"

"Cold and hungry, but musn't grumble," smiled Fred, who held his steaming hot mug of tea so it would warm his hands. He fetched himself a bacon sandwich, wolfed it down, knocked back his tea, and then got up again.

"See you later, Professor, and you, young fella."

"Bye," said Mike.

While Barry commenced a tidy up, Mike and Professor Pendragon sat opposite each other with the professor smiling away and Mike feeling a little awkward, not knowing what to say. The professor sensed this and again spoke to Mike.

"Are you looking forward to going back to Hemlock Hall, Michael. . . ?"

"Well, yes I was, but now I'm being sent on the Sub – er – equity. No, that's not it – the Sab – er – the – er. . ."

"Sabbatical?" suggested the professor.

"Yes, that's it! After a right carry on at the last minute, I found out that all new fifth formers – or at least some of us – go on this – er – year out thingy, and that's why I'm on this – er – caravan."

"I know all about the Sabbatical, Michael, went on one m'self. I wish I was a fifth former again, best year of my life. . ."

The elderly professor went quiet; he now seemed distracted somewhat. Mike surmised, quite correctly, that the old man was musing on the joys of his own youth many years in the past. But Mike couldn't take the awkward silence, he found it embarrassing and so decided to try and break it.

"So – erm – what are sabbaticals like, Professor? Are they enjoyable?"

"Hm? Oh, yes; every minute, Michael, every minute!" enthused the professor, now firmly back in the here and now. "Each year is different, though, at least in more recent times. After it had become clear that a high degree of cheating had crept in to the proceedings over the years, Professor Winch and his equals around the country and the world insisted on being allowed to work in absolute tip-top secrecy when planning the sabbaticals. Also, as a further measure designed to outwit the cheats thus preserving the integrity of the Sabbatical, the organising committee decided that apart from any qualifying events which could safely be repeated, there would be a total lack of repetition of the various challenges which make up each Sabbatical itself. There are no winners in the usual sense, you understand; it's not a competition despite many believing it to be so, but there is prestige to be gained, and official recognition of various competencies. But more than one pupil over the years has returned with an armful of certificates for activities

which, many staff believe, they simply could not have excelled in to the degree that they did, without prior coaching, and intensive coaching at that. If such an option was available to all then no-one would bat an eyelid, but the idea of an elite few gaining such an advantage, well, that, as our non-magic friends would say, is just not cricket. The end result here is that no former participant, friend, relation or even member of staff can possibly give their child, friend, or pupil an unfair advantage – because what has been . . . will not be again!" (He finished his sentence in a delightfully affected melodramatic tone).

Through Professor Pendragon first mentioning the school and then his headmaster by name, Mike began to think that both men were old friends or at least knew each other.

"Do you know Professor Winch, then – er – Professor?"

"Indeed I do, Michael, Indeed I do! Winchy – er – Professor Winch is one of my closest friends. Sadly though, we do not get to meet up very often nowadays, my work keeps me mostly in Wales, and when I'm not there I'm even further afield. We still do keep track of each other, though, mostly through attending the same meetings and conferences here and there, and he very occasionally visits me in Wales.

"One thing you haven't mentioned. Where are they holding this year's Sabbatical?"

"Bucharest, in Romania," replied Mike, "never been out of the country up until now, and when I do I'm on a magic caravan going to Romania!"

A smiling Mike looked across at Professor Pendragon. He wasn't sure but he thought he could see worry in the professor's eyes and on his furrowed brow, what he could see of it, and which had not been there seconds before.

"Er – quite, quite – Michael, Bucharest you say, yes, quite. Er – now, young man (although smiling again, the professor's countenance was forced, but Mike dismissed the earlier worried look and readily accepted the professor's seeming enthusiasm), tell me about your little test. Did it take you long to solve the puzzle? I believe these days it has something to do with riddles, poems, and budgerigars. Never used to. In my day we had to survive in a forest and avoid detection by everything from grizzly bears to wolf-whales. Great fun!"

Mike was very impressed by this, but also a little alarmed. If that was just the qualifying test what did the Sabbatical itself consist of? And anyone who could sleep out in the open with a wolf-whale (whatever that was) next door and call it great fun, must be someone special.

"I guess I was lucky, really," said Mike, and he went on to relate the whole story concerning the poem and the very short visit from a mysterious budgie.

When he'd finished, the professor was stroking his chin and seemed miles away. Mike had come to expect such eccentric behaviour from elderly professors and thought nothing of it. Eventually the professor snapped out of his trance-like thoughts.

"I think, my lad, I've kept you up long enough, I'd better let you get some rest. And don't be worrying about the Sabbatical, everything will be just fine."

The professor leaned over and offered his hand to Mike, who gratefully shook it as it meant sleep at last, but not in quite the way he thought. What Mike didn't see was that Professor Pendragon had his left hand behind his chair with his fingers crossed. The professor's right hand reached out to meet Mike's, at the same time brushing Mike's tea mug which Barry still hadn't cleared away.

The professor stood up as if to retire to bed himself, but suddenly turned to Mike.

"Finish your drink, young fella, Barry's waiting to wash up."

A mystified Mike thinking he'd already finished ages ago, swallowed the last mouthful of his sweet, tepid tea. Mike looked up from his mug, but at the same time he began to feel a little light-headed. He looked straight across the table to see the kind, caring but worried face of Professor Pendragon – vanishing in a bluey mist. The Magic Caravan – and everyone in it – was drifting far, far away. . .

The next thing he knew he was coming out of Aunt Hattie's Sweet Emporium with his friends. They were all carrying huge armfuls of every sweet known to man, woman, wizard or witch. This image gradually faded from his mind, and he found himself back in goal for the Barnswick Bedazzlers. It was the Semi-Final of the FA Cup and they were playing Manchester United. It was nil-nil with eight seconds to go. He pulled off a stupendous save (again!); but it didn't stop there. Mike kicked the ball right up the field and it flew onwards towards the United goal. The United goalie dived to his right and just about reached the ball – but the kick had been so powerful it took both the goalie and the ball over the line. The stunned United team didn't even have time to rush to the centre-circle to restart. The referee blew his whistle. The Bedazzlers had beaten Manchester United one-nil – and were in the FA Cup Final.

"Summat up, Perfessor?" asked Barry, who noticed Mike was in a deep sleep and that Professor Pendragon was frowning and moving his hand across his forehead.

"Yes, I'm afraid there is. How much do you know about our young friend's Romania trip?"

"Yeah, funny yer shud menshun that. Professor Winch speshlly requested that only Mike 'n' yusself wuz ta gerron tonight. A bir' odd, but I duz's i'se tole me, an' so's Fred. No bovver from us, in fact, I wuz only a sayin' the uvver–"

"Yes, yes, quite!" said a terse Profesor Pendragon. "But what about Romania? Do you know of anything untoward about Michael going to Romania?!"

"Er – not really," said Barry, "bin doin' the Sabbatical run for years now, it don' seem nuffin' strange to me. All's I know is, Professor Winch isself said to

pick only you 'n' Mike up, an' 'ed straight to Bucharest – that's it."

Barry happened to glance at Mike and noticed that his tea-mug had dropped out of his hand onto his lap, and that a blue frothy substance was dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. He turned to the professor and yelled, "'Ere! No funny bizness on this 'ere caravan! Whar' in the name o' Merlin's whiskers your game, Prof?!"

"Calm down, Barry, it's only FDP – er – Favourite Dream potion. Look, here it is."

Professor Pendragon showed him the bottle, but Barry still wasn't sure what to think.

"Fing is, Perfessor, wha' d'ya 'ave to give 'im that stuff fer, any'ow?"

The professor thought for a moment before replying.

"Please listen carefully to what I have to say. Although I'm not at liberty to tell you the whole story, I'll tell you what I can. Two weeks ago a very old book was stolen from the university library. The book is the only remaining copy of *'Trevelyan's Applied Chaotagens'*. In the wrong hands – it can – and most probably will – result in a catastrophe for the whole world."

"But wha'rras this got t'do wiv Mike? Why's 'e bin put to sleep?"

"I think 'knocked out' is the phrase you are looking for, and it was necessary because I believe Michael's life is in danger, and it's best if he stays in a deep sleep while I decide what to do."

This did not sound convincing enough for Barry.

"So some mouldy ole book gets stole from some borin' ole library in Wales – and 'Mike 'ere's in 'orrible danger cos 'e's goin' to Romania?! I knows yer a clever man, Perfessor, but ya gonna 'ave to do better 'n' that. I'll tell yer what we're gonna do, I'se contackin' someone fer 'elp, 'n' don' try any funny bizness wiv me or I'll clonk yer wiv me keckle."

"Come, come, Barry, you know me better than that. You must trust me! How many times have I travelled on this caravan? Surely you must know I'd never harm anyone?"

"Yeah, well," said Barry, "yer's go' me all a flummerghasted. I'se dunno what to fink. You could be that Zenoosi geezer for all I know!"

The worried professor tired of the useless time-burning argument, and of correcting Barry's less than perfect grammar. In a flash, he pulled out a small wand from his dressing gown pocket – pointed it at Barry – and said, '*FDP Serenicus!*' This had the same effect on Barry as the bottled variety had had on Mike.

Barry was now back in his youth, sagging off school and trout fishing with his pals.

The professor quickly put Barry opposite Michael, and went to his case on the luggage rack. He rummaged around and then took out a machine, slightly bigger than a typewriter but in reality was a telemagickeraph. The professor placed it on the work top, shunted the casing back to the far left, and began to type.

The magic of this machine is that although the operator types the message

out, it doesn't reproduce on paper but the message is automatically heard by the person being contacted. Although powerful wizards can already contact each other telepathically from long distances, the telemagickeraph is encrypted and so is a more secure way of doing so. The best of it is the receiver doesn't need to use one to reply but simply talks back to the sender. The intended recipient was none other than Professor Gabriel Winch. . .

" . . . Yes, yes, please close off the library, Letitia. If you think it's an urban wolf-whale, I'll call the boys in. Now I suggest. . ." At this point, Professor Winch put his hands to his ears, listened for a few seconds, and then returned to addressing the gathering of teaching staff assembled in his office for their daily meeting. "Pardon me, everyone, but I have an urgent message coming through – I'll take it in the annexe – please continue without me for a while." The headmaster swept past them all through a doorway at the side of his office and closed the door.

It didn't take long for Professor Winch to be brought up to date on events aboard Wimpole's Magic Caravan, but as good as a telemagickeraph is, Professor Pendragon couldn't see the mystified and worried look on Professor Winch's face.

Professor Pendragon summed up the worrying situation.

"The thing is, Gabriel, I don't wish to seem critical of you or the other heads, but why on earth did you choose Bucharest for the Sabbatical? You must have known that we've reason to believe Zenith stole the book and that certain events in Bucharest – indeed all over Romania – mean we're fairly certain he's using his old hide out over there. If he finds out Michael is—"

"Aloysius!" retorted Professor Winch. "You've put two and two together and got four and a bit. You're nearly there but not quite. Firstly, Michael, as far as I could tell did not pass the test. He did not contact me through the budgerigar or any other way. Nor would I have told him to go to Romania because the location of the Sabbatical has been changed to a location in this country, much to our European friends' disgust.

"As for Barry and Fred of the Magic Caravan, I have had no contact with them for some considerable time, and I have been trying for some considerable time to contact Michael myself, without success. It would appear, my good friend, that Professor Zenith is behind all of this. Who else could not only fool Michael but also block all my attempts to contact him?"

"And don't forget, he fooled Barry," chipped in Aloysius.

"Er – yes, he fooled Barry – amazing, but let us think what we can do. At least Michael is safe for the moment, and I agree with you that there isn't time to turn back or even stop for any lengthy period. Your need to get to Bucharest without delay just about outweighs the need to get Michael well away from the danger he could face. However, with a little luck, I think you have just enough time to make a quick stop en route to Bucharest. I am reasonably confident that our enemies, while suspecting its existence, do not know the exact location of our Romanian safe haven nor realise that we are

on to them. However, they are obviously planning to nab you both somewhere along the way. So, first things first: get Fred to change the scheduled flight plan, as it were, you should all be safe yourself then.

"But first, I would be very grateful and very relieved if you would drop young Miller off with our friends at the Academy in Krickenstaltz. I will contact them directly, I will then follow shortly with a small escort party to bring him home. Then, if need be, we will assist you in your task."

"You can count on me, Gabriel."

"As ever, my friend, as ever. Goodbye for now, Aloysius, and good luck!"

"We'll need it!" said Professor Pendragon.

"Quite!" said Professor Winch.

19

Notions and Potions

WITH BOTH BARRY AND MIKE as happy as Larry (Larry being this year's winner of the happiest wizard contest), Professor Pendragon broke the golden rule – he crossed over the big yellow line which marked the boundary between the passengers' quarters and the cab.

Fred Marsh was no fool. He was much older than Barry and he'd certainly been around the block a few times (he owed this to a phobia of turning right, thankfully of which he is now cured).

The professor walked through the door marked, *'NO PASSENGERS ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT'*. He climbed a couple of steps and was up on top. As the horse, old Ned, clip-clopped along, seemingly without being controlled in any way, the professor saw Fred, sitting down and studying some kind of chart.

Fred was quietly talking to himself. "Hmmm, let's see . . . ah, yes, 101 degrees southeast, that's the fella." He leaned forward and nudged an odd looking but solid arrangement of magic wands of every colour, shaped like a snowflake or perhaps a 3D asterix. This just hovered in front of Fred with no other support whatsoever. Fred moved it up slightly and a bit to the right. Straightaway, the horse veered and took the next right turn.

Although Mike, back in the caravan did not know it, they were flying and had been for some time. Despite this the horse continued to clip-clop along, lifting his hooves up and clomping them down on fresh air.

"Ahem!" coughed the professor. Fred jumped up out of his chair and with sheer fright, ripped his chart clean in two. After regaining his senses, Fred was not a happy man.

"What on earth are you playing at?! You nearly frightened the life out of me! Now you of all people, Professor, should know that passengers aren't allowed up here! Hang on a mo, where's Barry? What's the problem?"

Professor Pendragon put a comforting arm round Fred.

"Calm down, Fred, Barry's asleep, so is young Michael, but there is something I urgently need to discuss with you."

The professor explained the situation to a disbelieving Fred, who was only seconds away from receiving the third blast of FDP of the evening, but as the professor was about to produce his wand, Fred relented. This was just as well, because Professor Pendragon hadn't thought too far ahead, for if he had sent Fred off to go cart racing down Pendle Hill, who would have taken the reins?

"Very well, Professor, Krickenstaltz it is, but you had better explain this to the Magic Council. They pay Barry and I for us to be exclusive to them, so

any trouble, just you tell 'em you're to blame!"

The professor thanked Fred and reassured him (with his hands behind his back and his fingers crossed), that everything would be OK. To such mutterings as, 'Been in this job twenty years!', and, 'Well tie me to a ducking stool!', and so on and so forth, Fred made the necessary changes to their equineous flight-plan so as to evade the enemy, while Professor Pendragon went back to the passenger section of the caravan. He again went over to the luggage rack, rummaged in his case, took out a bottle of smelling salts and went over to where Barry was still slumped next to Mike.

"Come on, Barry, wakey, wakey, there's a good fellow," said the professor as he waved the opened bottle under his nose.

The speed of Barry's return to consciousness took the professor by surprise. His head shot up and next thing is he had Professor Pendragon in a headlock. Barry started shouting.

"'Ere – Seth! Charlie! Gimme a 'and! This is a biggun! It's! It's! Er – oo! Flippin' 'eck!" Barry, although still groggy, finally came back to reality. "'Ere! You wen' an' put me dahn! Wha' d'ya do that for?!"

The professor, only just able to speak, replied, "If you let go of me, I can explain everything!"

"'Ow do I know you won' do nuffin' else t'me?!" said Barry.

The professor protested further of his indignity.

"My dear chap, we cannot stay in this position for ever! Do be a good fellow and let go of me!"

"Gimme ya wand!" demanded Barry.

"I beg your pardon?!" retorted the professor.

"Gimme ya wand, I tells ya! If there's gonna be any more spellin' an' potionin', it's me who's a gonna be doin' it!"

"Very well, it's in my pocket."

Barry reached inside the professor's pocket and took out his wand, but he still held on tight.

"If I let go, d'ya promise no more funny bizness?"

"Yes! Yes! I promise. Now let me go!" came the terse reply.

Barry released Professor Pendragon from his iron grip and flung the wand down the caravan towards the cab.

"I'se no good at magic, me. I accidentally turned me own muvver into an 'orse wiv a stoopid spell. Shockin! Poor ole cow!" Professor Pendragon was astounded.

"Er – where is the poor old – er – your mother now?"

"In a field in Melton Mowbr'y — back o' tha' Farmer Jenks's gaff. I takes 'er some carrots 'n' a nice birra straw on me day off. Loves t' see me – makes a right fuss, she does—"

"Er – Barry, I'm sorry to hear about your mother, but we do have other pressing matters to attend to."

The two sat at the table next to Mike, who wasn't really there but was now running around Wembley with the cup after the Barnswick Bedazzlers had

thrashed Everton twelve-nil in the FA Cup Final. Mike was lifted high onto the shoulders of his teammates, as they did yet another lap of honour with the crowd going wild.

After a great effort, the professor finally made Barry realise the seriousness of their situation, and just as importantly, convinced him he was on Barry's side.

"Well burn me at the stake!" said Barry. "I'se sorry, Perfessor, shud'v' believed ya earlier. Wharra we gonna do now?"

"There's not a great deal we can do right now," replied the professor, "we are in Romania, but due to having to do an emergency re-route, we're still a few hours away from Krickenstaltz. The Academy is expecting us, but we can only see Mike safely into their hands and then it's straight on to Bucharest."

The blood visibly drained from Barry's face.

"Don't worry, Barry, you 'n' – er – and Fred will be safe, trust me. As soon as you drop me off in Bucharest you'll be on your way home. Professor Zenith won't even know you were there."

Barry didn't say anything to this, he couldn't, he'd fainted.

"Where's those smelling salts?" sighed Professor Pendragon. It wasn't long before Barry was revived yet again.

"'Ere! Why's you got your fingers crossed behinds yer back?" Barry demanded to know.

"Arthritis," replied the professor.

There was really nothing else that could be gained from further discussion. It was simply a matter of waiting.

As Mike had fallen asleep in rather an awkward position, both the professor and Barry lifted him over to the side of the caravan and put him in one of two bunk beds behind the curtain. These were usually reserved just for Barry and Fred, but they had got to know the old professor so well, that he usually had a nap in one of the bunks whenever he was travelling overnight. The twenty jupiter tip, paid in advance, had no influence on them whatsoever.

It wasn't too long before both Professor Pendragon and Barry Wimpole were snoring so loudly, that Fred heard it from the cab.

"I know who's got the best job on this caravan, and it ain't me," he said to himself as he made one last alteration to their course.

*

Mike opened his eyes and gave a big yawn.

"Morning, Professor, Morning, Barry."

"Mornin', m'lad," replied Barry, doing his best to sound bright and breezy, despite the circumstances.

"Dunno how I got in here, but I think I'll get— AAAARRRGGHHH!" Mike, suddenly realising he was stark naked, grabbed the curtain to cover himself.

"'Ere! Pack tharrin! You ain' go' wha' we ain't! Just simmer dahn!" shouted Barry.

"Easy, Barry, easy," said Professor Pendragon, sensing Mike's embarrassment.

"Sorry, lad, rough night las' night, not much of a kip. 'Ere, put these on, then it's brekky for you, m'lad," said Barry, holding out Mike's freshly laundered clothes and newly polished shoes.

Mike, standing there like Julius Caesar, wanly smiled and nodded his head. Although two fry-ups in twenty-four hours is not a good thing for either magic or non-magic folk, Mike wasn't complaining.

Professor Pendragon tried his best to remain patient, but he just couldn't help pacing up and down with a worried look on his face.

Mike decided that the professor must be musing over the details of his next lecture, perhaps Magic Quantum Theory. Mike didn't even know what ordinary quantum theory was, but it sounded good, even just in his mind.

The professor's pacing didn't ease up, and Mike was on his third sausage when he noticed the professor glancing at him as if he wanted him to finish, but couldn't say it straight out as he was too polite.

With a combination of feeling full and feeling under pressure, Mike pushed his plate away and made an obvious show of patting his stomach. A very real, unintentional burp straight afterwards only helped his cause.

"Finished, Mike? Good," said a relieved professor, who wasn't going to wait for an answer however polite he normally was. "Er – well, Mike," began a nervous Professor Pendragon, "you know you thought you had spoken to Professor Winch, and that you thought you were going to Bucharest to take part in a Sabbatical. . ."

Thirty minutes later and Mike just could not believe what he had just heard. Although Professor Pendragon was very careful to omit certain things, he did reveal the fact that Mike had been caught up in an age old vendetta, but this on its own was bad enough. The thought of wilfully and knowingly travelling towards some tyrannical, evil wizard – none other than Professor Zenith – rather than Fred doing a straightforward U-turn and going straight back home, made his stomach churn – or was that the eight sausages?

However, as frightening as this was and as much as he wanted to be back at Hemlock Hall or at home in the park playing football, Mike resigned himself to going to Romania to stay with strangers.

What made it all worse was that he didn't even know if he could trust anyone anymore. How could he be sure that Professor Pendragon had managed to contact the real Professor Winch? And what of Professor Pendragon himself? Or even Barry and Fred? Time will tell, hoped Mike, and with that decided to at least try to go back to sleep in the vain hope that this would somehow banish all of the unwelcome tension-filled uncertainty which had entered his young life.

There was still a little way to go before reaching Krickenstaltz. Mike was again fully awake and he and the professor were again sitting opposite each other at the table, while Barry was leaning against the cupboards, reading a newspaper.

Mike did not like the eerie silence one little bit and decided to force a conversation.

"Professor, if this is a magic caravan, then why can't we just go somewhere straightaway? And seeing as we're all wizards, why do we need vehicles at all? Why don't we just disappear and reappear whenever we're going anywhere? This whole magic business is really confusing. One minute we're all doing things the normal, er – non-magic way, and next, someone casts a spell to do exactly the same thing. I'll never be able to work out why."

If Mike had seen Barry during his oratory on the merits and demerits of magic, he'd have seen him grinning like a Cheshire cat and winking at the professor, but he did hear him.

"Over ta you, Perfessor! It's times like this I'se glad I's jus' a caravaneer!"

Professor Pendragon, resigned to Mike's restlessness, did his best.

"You have just asked the meaning of life there, Mike, or of wizard life at least. There are many things about magic that would take a long time to explain properly and a fair few things that can never be explained. It's best to think of magic like a precious commodity, like oil, or diamonds – it can't be wasted. The life of magic folk is not and cannot be defined by living lives where every single action, thought, or emotion is controlled by magic – it's a foolish wizard or witch who would try to live his or her life like this, and very soon they would have exhausted all their powers.

"Take this caravan for example: it's magic right enough, but although it's many times faster on the road than ordinary vehicles, despite not seeming to be, it's actually slower than an aeroplane when in the air, but we have the option of not being seen, that's the balance that has to be struck. I could go on for ever, Mike, but for now remember this, my very own motto for getting through wizard life: 'Peel potatoes with a knife, save the magic for the strife'."

As Barry chuckled away at such an idea, Mike mused on the professor's words and remembered something of a similar conversation with Farmer Harris some time back.

Mike's musing was disturbed by Fred, walking through from the cab.

"Sorry to spoil your fun, folks, but we are just coming up to Krickenstaltz. Oh, and good morning."

With just a little jolt, the magic caravan ended its flight and landed somewhere in Romania.

Barry helped Mike get his things together.

The passenger door opened and they all stepped down from the caravan. Barry was first, followed by the professor, and then a very reluctant Mike carrying his case. Fred jumped down from the cab to join them. They arrived just on daybreak and they looked around as the sun came up. It was obvious they were in a forest clearing. The forest itself was full of sinister, tall, but very crooked, knarled trees that Mike had never seen the like of before.

As the sun gathered strength and filtered in through the canopy, the bemused party could see a path leading away northwards from where they stood, and in the distance to the left and right, they could see mountains surrounding the forested valley which held the Academy of Krickenstaltz, and

on the lower slopes they could just make out small stone buildings, all with chimneys and all of which were billowing thick black smoke.

"Blummy, some spooky 'ole this is, 'n' no mistake," said Barry, breaking the silence. Although he and Fred had dropped passengers off at Krickenstaltz on several previous occasions, they had never alighted from the caravan and surveyed the locale – until now.

"Yes, yes, I know what you mean, but believe me when I say that appearances can sometimes be deceptive. Right here in this seemingly unwelcoming forest you are far safer than when you are at home, tucked up in bed," said Professor Pendragon. This didn't seem to be the case as far as Mike and the two coach men were concerned, but all were then distracted from their musing.

"'Ere, 'oo's this lot a-gallopin' towards us?" said Barry.

They all looked down the path and approaching them on horseback were six riders, all dressed in a strange combination of wizard's robes, hats, and riding gear. There were two front riders, three at the rear and one in the middle. They came within a few feet of the visitors and then stopped. The two front riders moved further apart; the one in the middle dismounted and began to walk towards them. He was more grandly attired than the others with long, flowing gold, silver and burgundy robes and a tall, equally brightly coloured wizard's hat, and sporting a long, straggly, ginger beard. Mike noticed that he looked very, very old. This strange old man looked at each of them in turn and upon seeing Professor Pendragon, broke into a smile.

"Nize to see you again, Profezzor – velcome back. Velcome – all ov you – to Krickenstaltz. I am Profezzor Ren Stannich, Director ov ze Academy. Ah, and ziss must be Mike. Pleezed to meet you, young man."

Much to Mike's embarrassment, he gave Mike an over-hard rub of his hair, like any doting aunt would do.

"Er – hello," mumbled Mike, while smiling awkwardly.

Professor Pendragon returned the greeting, while Barry and Fred stood around nervously.

Professor Stannich glanced at the caravan, walked right up to it and patted it on the side as if it was his trusty steed.

"Zo – ziss iz ze famuz Vimbolez Magick Caravan? A little vay from ze Peeccalilly Zircus – no?"

This silly interlude broke the ice and a much easier Barry and Fred grinned and shook hands with Professor Stannich.

"Only you daft English vud villingly stand around, and – 'ow you say – 'az natter in ze freezing cold forest? Come! Come! Time for zum 'ot mead – and 'ow you say – 'az ze bacon buttiez – yez?"

"I'm sorry, Ren, as tempting as that is," said Professor Pendragon, "but I must place Mike in your care immediately. I've urgent business to attend to in Bucharest and we can't delay any longer."

"Ov courze, Alleyvicious, ov courze – but do not vurry, ve shall take ze great care viz Mike." He turned to a very reluctant and seemingly frightened

Mike Miller. "Mike, I promise you zat no 'arm vill 'appen to you vile you are viz us. You vill very soon become friends viz everyvon 'ere at Krickenstaltz. Come, Mike, ve 'ad better go."

Mike looked at Professor Pendragon, he didn't say anything but his eyes told the professor that he did not want to leave his side and go off with strangers.

Mike summed up all of his courage and began his goodbyes.

"Bye, Professor, see you soon."

"Bye, Mike, nice to have met you, I'm only sorry things haven't gone as you originally planned, but I assure you, you will be safe here." (On this occasion, Professor Pendragon did not have his hand behind his back with his fingers crossed, but Professor Stannich certainly did. Although due to his great age and the cold climate, the old man really did have arthritis).

Mike shook hands with Professor Pendragon and moved on to Barry and Fred, shaking their hands in turn.

"Bye, Barry. Bye, Fred. And thanks. Thanks to all of you, for – er – well, you know – thanks!"

The truth was, Mike didn't know why he was really thanking them at all, because only the night before he had thought he was due to meet at least some of his pals and have a year out to develop his skills, but instead, he was now being left in the middle of Romania with some vengeful maniac only just up the road. Still, they had been friendly to him and the professor had been quick off the mark to realise something was wrong, so it was right to thank them after all.

"Bye, Mike, I'se 'appy to 'ave yer on this 'ere caravan anytime, 'n' I 'opes ter see yer agin soon," said Fred.

"'Ere, ya cheeky monkey!" said Barry, laughing. "Bye, Mike, I finks y'll be OK 'ere."

Professor Stannich, with a reassuring arm around him, stood with Mike – and they watched and waved as the three got back on board.

With Ned once again treading fresh air, Wimpole's Magic Caravan was soon back up in the air and away.

20

The Academy

MIKE'S TRAVELLING COMPANIONS were gone and he was left standing in a dismal forest with strangers.

Professor Stannich shouted out something in his own language, and two of the riders rode up and gestured to Mike and took his case.

"Come, Mike, climb up on my 'orse. Let us see about zose bacon buttiez – yez?" said the professor.

As Mike had never ridden a horse he soon found that getting on one was rather different to mounting a broomstick when playing Empires. Much to the amusement of the other riders, Mike only made it into the saddle (and more importantly, finally stayed there), after several failed attempts and a near miss. This is when he did get up and on but slipped right over and fell right off the other side. However, soon he was properly mounted and a laughing Professor Stannich climbed up and took the reins. All the riders did an about-turn to make their return journey, and Professor Stannich gently steered his mount back into the middle of the escort party.

"'Old on tight, Mike. Schment! Schment!"

The horses broke into a canter and Mike held on tight to his new guardian. They rode back along the path which twisted and turned, and the dense forest became even darker and more foreboding. The mountains all around them with the mysterious smoking buildings could now only be occasionally glimpsed. The thickness of the trees and the softness of the ground dulled the sound of the horse's hooves, and Mike and the professor were able to talk as they cantered along.

"Mike, you may be vundering – vy no magick – yez?"

"Er – yes, I was a bit," said a diplomatic Mike, as he was actually wondering what Romanian bacon tasted like. "It's not something to do with peeling potatoes, is it?" remembering a recent conversation.

"Ah, ze gud Profezzor Pendragon. No no, Mike, all-zo ze Profezzor's right, ov courze, ziss iz zumzing a bit different. Magick iz like ze firelight, Mike. You zumtimes don't do ze magick, if you don't vont to be seen – no. . . ?"

"I think I understand," said Mike, not understanding at all.

They rode on in silence. The path still twisted and turned and at one point narrowed to where they all had to ride in single file, ensuring that Mike and the professor remained in the middle. Soon, the path widened again, wider even than before and soon they were in a large clearing. Mike looked ahead to see the Krickenstaltz Academy coming into view. The Academy seemed like a huge, gothic style fortress. The sight of it made Mike gasp out loud.

"Wow! This place is incredible!"

"Beautiful – yez?" said the professor.

"Er – yes – fantastic!" replied Mike. Mike's answer was somewhat diplomatic – again. It wasn't beautiful, it was most certainly ugly – and very scary; but it was, as Mike had said, incredible. It was several tiers high and was shaped something like an Elizabethan mansion. However, instead of it being angular, the wings of the building swept round in semi-circular fashion. The Academy was situated at the northern end of a valley and had been built deep into a foothill of one of the mountains. This meant that the top tier stretched further back than the others below.

Anyone approaching from the south as Mike and his new found friends had done, were able to see the full extent of the Academy because of its position on the mountainside at the bottom of the gentle rolling slopes. What gave the building its ugly appearance was the stone used to build it. Each and every one was jet black, mis-shapen, jagged, and gashed. It was as if the world's worst storm – complete with the highest concentration of fork lightning ever – had visited Krickenstaltz, done its worst, and had come back again the next day because it had enjoyed it so much the first time. It reminded Mike of somewhere else but he couldn't think where. There were windows, hundreds of them, but as Mike observed – they may as well not have been there. Those that were not broken were filthy, and they were all heavily barred up as if to keep out a terrifying enemy. Mike guessed that such a foe was not the local planning officer. The riding party arrived at the front of the building.

"Gusk! Gusk!"

Mike's thoughts were disturbed by the professor's command for the horses to stop. Professor Stannich dismounted and helped Mike down.

To the right of the building was the front entrance: this was a huge wooden door, about forty feet high and about twenty-five feet wide. It was locked by three huge metal slats across the top, middle and bottom, and these were embedded deep into the stone on either side.

Professor Stannich gave his riders instructions, who then rode off and were soon out of sight. He turned to Mike. "Pleeze listen, ziss iz important. I vont you to 'ave ziss. You must keep it on you at all times vile you are 'ere viz us." He handed Mike a little cut-glass miniature figure of the Academy on a metal chain.

"What is it? A keepsake?" asked Mike.

"Let us say, it iz a key, but it iz really much more zan zat. You must 'ave it viz you wherever you go wizzin ze Academy, if not, you vill soon find yourself trapped, and it may be zum time before ve can get you out."

"Oh," said a mystified Mike.

"Ziss vay," said the professor, and he walked towards the door which was opened by someone from the inside as they walked across the porch.

Mike was in the hallway of the Academy. Standing with the professor were two men and one woman. One looked remarkably like Professor Stannich, but a lot younger. Mike guessed this to be his brother. The other two were

busy taking the professor's riding gear, hat, and gloves.

"Mike, I'd like you to meet Ernzt, my bruzzer – and zeez are Marina and Laszlo, two ov ze staff 'ere at ze Academy." Marina curtsied, Laszlo bowed and they both gave Mike warm smiles, but said nothing.

Ernst, however, gave Mike a big grin, shook hands and said, "Hello, young Michael, it is a pleasure to meet you." Mike was taken by surprise by his perfect English but before he could reply, Ernst continued: "Five years at Hemlock Hall, Mike, most of which I think was spent in elocution lessons."

Mike felt awkward and was struggling for words. Professor Stannich sensed this and turned to Marina and Laszlo and asked them to get Mike's things and show him to his room. He turned back to Mike. "I beg your pardon, Mike, but zumzing 'az come up which needz ze attenzun ov Ernzt and I. Pleeze go viz Marina and she vill show you to your room. I 'ope you don't mind remaining zer until zumvon comes for you to show you to ze dining room."

"No, no problem. Thank you," said Mike.

The two brothers walked off to the left and went up an old stone staircase. Marina asked Laszlo to get Mike's things and gestured to Mike to follow.

The main corridor ran in a straight line from the hallway and Mike looked around as they walked along. The interior of the Academy was as stark as the outer walls which were of the same stone. There was no decor, ornaments, pictures or statues of any kind. The long, dark corridor was lit only by the occasional fire-torch hung up here and there upon the bare wall. There were, however, plenty of rooms along the corridors and passageways, but no windows to look into them. Each door they passed was made of the same wood as the main entrance and the same kind of metal slats kept them locked. There were also passageways to the left and right as they continued walking, but they didn't turn down any of them, and as Mike noticed as he peered along each one, they all looked exactly the same. Mike was confused. He was being made to feel very welcome and yet this didn't fit in with the remnants of the dark ages he found himself surrounded by.

They finally reached the end of the passageway, a dead-end made of the same splintered rock. To the right was a winding staircase, and Marina turned round to make sure Mike was still following and began to climb the stairs. Mike hoped that his room was on the first floor as he was beginning to tire, luckily for Mike it was.

Marina walked along the first landing and down the corridor until she came to the first door on the right. She opened the door for Mike and turned to face him. "'Ere you are, Mizter Miller, ziss iz your room. I'm sure you vill find it cumftyvul."

Mike, who had heard one comic mis-pronunciation too many, just about managed to suppress a laugh. "Thank you, I'm sure it will be fine."

A huffing, puffing, sweating Laszlo finally caught up and placed Mike's case on the floor.

"Thank you, both of you, you've been a great help," said Mike.

"You're velcome, young man," replied Marina, and followed by a still

sweating, red-faced Laszlo, walked off back down the corridor and down the staircase.

Mike went into the room and looked around. The room was very gloomy; again there was no decor of any sort and there was yet another fire-torch hung on the wall. This was lit, permanently it would seem, because even in daytime hardly any natural light seemed to be able to get through. In the middle of the room was an enormous wrought iron bed with a huge quilt and a long bolster instead of smaller pillows. "At least I'll be comfortable, maybe even cumvtyvul," thought Mike, allowing himself a wry smile.

The only other things that were in the room were an old battered one-door wardrobe, a small equally decrepit chest of drawers which doubled up as a table to hold a small bowl, and a bar of soap. No towels – no mirror.

"Great!" said a glum Mike to himself as he went to get his case from outside.

Mike stretched out on his bed and thought back over the last twelve hours or so. He just couldn't believe that the voice from a budgerigar he'd never seen before belonged to the mysterious Professor Zenith, and not his headmaster. And what if Professor Pendragon hadn't had a feeling something was wrong? What would have happened then?

One thing was really niggling Mike. If Zenith had tricked him into going to Bucharest, and even though Professor Pendragon still had to go there despite whatever else was going on, surely Zenith would have realised that the professor knew something was not right and that his plan would be exposed and ruined? Mike drew a blank on the reasons why, but there were still plenty more questions he asked himself, especially about Krickenstaltz.

Why couldn't the caravan stop much closer to the entrance? Why no magic? Why does the whole place seem stuck in the seventeenth century? Why no electricity? Why no hot or even cold running water? Why no vehicles, only horses? Why? Why? Why?

"Because, Mike, you are in a very poor part of Romania," said a voice directly into Mike's mind.

"Wh-wh-who is that?" said a startled Mike.

"It's me, Mike – Professor Winch – the real me this time. Professor Pendragon is not the only one with a telemagickeraph, you know."

"But I only thunk, er – thought, h-how-how could you. . . ?"

"The deluxe model, Mike, the deluxe model," said Professor Winch.

"Oh!" said Mike. "The thing is, Professor, I was so completely fooled last time, how do I know who's really who anymore?"

"A good point, Mike, fair comment. The truth is, for you, you do not – not at the moment, but I promise you that in the not too distant future this will no longer present a problem. For now, however, I promise you that I will not ask anything particular of you. I will not give you dire and deadly tasks to complete or anything of the sort. This way it won't matter if I'm me, not me, or the dreaded Professor Zenith, or even Barry Wimpole with a newly acquired honours degree in ventriloquism."

Mike laughed out loud at this highly amusing but impossible scenario, but came back down to earth with a sinister thought.

"But how do I know that's not just an ingenious way of getting me to stay put and do as I'm told, so you, if you are – er – this Professor Zenith, can come and get me?"

Professor Winch gave a big sigh which was not transmitted down the brand new telemagickeraph with psychic booster included. He then returned to the cause.

"Consider the situation you are in, Mike – and yes, for a moment – let us forget that I am Professor Winch. What would Professor Winch tell you to do at the moment?"

"Stay put, and do as Professor Stannich asks me, I suppose," answered Mike.

"Correct!" said Professor Winch. "And what of Professor Zenith? An evil, odious man, full of poison, malice and trickery. What do you think he would actually ask of you, right now, were he to pretend he was me again. . . ?"

Mike paused before answering.

" . . . Er – as I've just said, he might tell me to stay here, but he could equally try and – er – trick me into leaving so it would be easier for him to capture me."

"So in other words, you're not sure?" asked Professor Winch.

"Er – no – not really," said Mike.

"But you are sure that Professor Winch would tell you to stay?"

"Yes, quite sure," said Mike.

"And so, Mike, what are you actually going to do?" asked Professor Winch.

"Stay here!" replied Mike.

"Good!" exclaimed Professor Winch. A huge sigh of relief resounded all around his office, but Professor Winch put his souvenir tea-towel from Magicombe in Devon over the telemagickeraph so Mike wouldn't hear it.

Both Mike and Professor Winch were relieved to get this sorted out. However, Mike's mind soon returned to the very reason why he was in Krickenstaltz at all.

"Professor, something has been puzzling me."

"There's something new," replied Professor Winch.

"It's about Professor Pendragon going to Bucharest. If Professor Zenith knew he was going there, and if Professor Pendragon knew that he knew, surely Professor Zenith would also have known that by tricking me to go on the caravan that it wouldn't take long for Professor Pendragon to know something was wrong, and try to do something about it! This just doesn't add up. It seems a stupid thing for this Professor Zenith to have done, although I know that he must be evil he doesn't sound in the least bit stupid. What do you think is going on?"

Professor Winch took an uncustomarily long time to answer this, but eventually. . .

"He doesn't hold all the cards in the pack, Michael. I'm sure he really did

believe that you would be stuck on Wimpole's Magic Caravan all the way to Bucharest. He knew that Professor Pendragon could not turn back, and he knew that he couldn't just drop you anywhere out of fear for your safety. That is why he thought he had proverbially killed two birds with one stone."

This still didn't seem entirely logical to Mike, and he pressed the professor.

"But I've been left here in Krickenstaltz! Although everyone's saying I'm safe, I'm not that far from this Professor Zenith bloke, which means I'm a flippin' sight nearer danger here than I would be if I was at Hemlock Hall, or even back home in Barnswick!"

Professor Winch again delayed answering Mike, but after some musing characterised by stroking his whiskers, Professor Winch decided on what he was to say next.

"Mike, the reason why you have been dropped off at the Krickenstaltz Academy, is because Professor Zenith does not know of its location and I sincerely hope he never will. That is why you are safe there."

"But how do you know he won't find this place? He'll know by now that I got off the caravan at some point. How do you know that he won't come looking for me – and–and and find me?"

At this point, luckily for Professor Winch, Daphne Llefevre knocked and came into his office over some trivial matter, but before she could explain, Professor Winch spoke first. 'Ah, Daphne, I'm afraid a quick call to young Mike has become rather extended, please be a love and get me a jug of coffee, there's a dear.' A highly insulted Daphne Llefevre muttered, 'Huh! there's a dear!', and went off to fetch the coffee.

"Let me see if I can make things clearer. The Krickenstaltz Academy is the secret headquarters of the Worldwide Federation of Wizards – or the WFW – and I happen to be its current Chief Wizard. Although we use the Academy for secret meetings, just turning up at night in a dark robe and wearing dark glasses is not secret enough. Since its beginning, many, many centuries ago, the whole place has been kept from the gaze of the ordinary world through powerful magic. Have you got this so far?"

"Er – yes – I think so," replied an uncertain Mike, but he was trying his best.

"Fair enough. We have also concocted other spells which ensure only magic folk who are pure of heart have been allowed within its walls, whereas anyone with only evil and malice on their mind can never gain entrance. The Academy is kept invisible by an army of wizards, the WFW, or at least its magic core of esteemed elders, the WFW Council. These esteemed gentlemen reinforce these spells seven days a week, three-hundred and sixty-five days a year.

"As well as ensuring invisibility, the WFW's magic also controls the doors, helped of course by all who enter receiving a transmutagen crystal. Do you have yours yet, by the way?"

"I've been given a model thingy?" replied Mike.

"That's it, keep it safe, you'll need it. Where was I? Oh, yes. The spells are

only effective if there is absolutely no interference from within, or indeed without. Apart from a very small number of special spells which have been formulated to allow exemption to this rule, such as the spells created to allow rapid travel, and the very occasional short-term spell to basically burn up excess magic energy, there can be no other magic emanating from the Academy, nor coming into it. And again, apart from occasional short-term exemptions, nor can there be any active energy sources from machines or other non-magic inventions. That, Mike, is why the Academy unfortunately seems so stark."

"Not even TV?" interjected Mike.

"Is there TV at Hemlock Hall, Mike?" came the mildly disapproving reply from Professor Winch.

"There's – er – Magivis' . . . er – no – sorry," said a suitably chastised Mike, who also thought it best not to be a smart-arse at that moment.

Professor Winch continued: "However, the spartan nature of Krickenstaltz does give us one advantage, a failsafe if you like. Should things go wrong, although this I very seriously doubt as being a possibility, and the Academy became visible, it would have no problem fitting in to the local environment. It is situated in a very poor part of the country. There is no electricity for many miles, no vehicles, no machines, no central heating or modern plumbing, nothing. The locals are forced to live as if they are permanently stuck in the middle ages. Krickenstaltz would simply look like yet another relic of a forgotten era, hopefully overlooked by would be invaders. Do you understand so far, Mike?"

"Yes, Professor, I think so, or at least most of it, but one thing doesn't really make any sense. If the spells are reliant on a total lack of interference, what would happen if there was any, whether deliberate or accidental?"

"I think, Mike," said Professor Winch "that you just mean deliberate and what if Professor Zenith should stumble upon this place? First, he is not pure of heart so he cannot gain entrance – and as he cannot gain entrance he cannot work magic from within the Academy – and as he cannot do this he has no chance of breaking the Federation's spells, and if the Federation's spells are not broken. . ."

Mike tried to guess Professor Winch's finish to the sentence and they both exclaimed together — "Zenith cannot get in!"

"Do you believe me now, Mike?" said a hopeful Professor Winch.

"Yes, Professor, thanks, that makes me feel a lot safer, but there are still some more things I'd like to ask you about."

This time Mike thought he heard a groan, but dismissed it as being Professor Winch breaking wind.

"Yes, Mike, fire away."

"What is the Book of Chaotagens all about? What can possibly be so bad about an old book being stolen?"

Professor Winch sighed and furrowed his brow. He had assumed that his good friend Aloysius would have known not to have mentioned such things in

front of Mike. What Professor Winch did not know, was that his good friend most certainly had not, and that a less than discreet Barry Wimpole had done the very thing that both esteemed professors had tried to prevent happening. Barry Wimpole knew nothing of the subtlety of secrecy, and had simply blurted it out while Mike was wide awake – and within earshot. Upon hearing this, Professor Pendragon had audibly yelped and had then indulged in a damage limitation exercise, restricting Barry 'Read All About It!' Wimpole, to the brief but dramatic utterance concerning the dreaded book. Mike had not since made any comments to either men concerning the book, and so Professor Pendragon and the caravaneering Town Crier had assumed Mike had either not been listening, or that the inherent severity of the topic had not registered with him — wrong.

Professor Winch sighed again, and again spoke down the telemagickeraph.

"Make that an extra large jug, would you, Daphne, and a couple of aspirin, there's a dear. Very well, Mike, very well. . ." said a tired Professor Winch. "*'Trevelyan's Book of Applied Chaotagens'*, to give the book its full and proper title, is a very old and very dangerous book which holds powerful secrets, terrible spells which only a truly evil mind could and would put together. Whoever has the book has the world in their grasp, and would be able to do with the Earth and all its people, whatever they wish.

"The power that the book can bring its possessor is so vast, that its continued existence as the showpiece in the University of Abracadrystwyth Library resulted in one thing upon which the British Magic Council and the WFW Council have managed to agree on, and that was and still is to destroy the book at the earliest opportunity – but on the very day I was going to put a small posse together to do just that, it was stolen only hours before we got there. That, Mike, is what this is all about."

Mike knew there was more to this and wouldn't let go.

"But what exactly is a Chaotagen, Professor?"

Professor Winch resigned himself to not getting away with the abridged version.

"A Chaotagen is a deadly potion which triggers off many evil spells – hundreds – perhaps thousands. There are four Chaotagens in all: an Earth Chaotagen, a Water Chaotagen, a Fire Chaotagen and a final cataclysmic Solar Chaotagen. Each one is capable of mass destruction on a scale not yet seen on Earth. Once released there would be global earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods – even in all of the world's deserts. There would be fires raging, even at the two poles and in the middle of the oceans. Should the evil mind responsible for their release desire it, although it would most certainly mean their own demise, the release of the Solar Chaotagen would cause the sun to shatter into a million pieces and us with it."

"But if Zenith has the book, doesn't that mean we've all had it anyway?!"

"No, not yet, Mike," replied Professor Winch, "although the book has been stolen, Professor Zenith does not have the Chaotagens themselves. These are kept in small phials and are hidden in four secret locations around the

world. The book lists their locations and has the spells that must be uttered over each Chaotagen.

"However, there is still one thing that Professor Zenith must have if he is to release their power, and that is the Chaotagen Wand. It, too, is hidden although the book did contain its location."

"What's the Chaotagen Wand?" asked a bemused Mike.

Professor Winch explained: "It is a special wand, the only one that can be used to perform the spells over the Chaotagens. It belonged to one Geryth Trevelyan, author of *'Trevelyan's Book of Applied Chaotagens'*, perhaps better known to you as Merlin."

"What?! Merlin?! King Arthur's Merlin?!" shouted an incredulous Mike.

"No, Mike, Merlin Smith, the butcher's boy! Yes, of course, King Arthur's Merlin!" replied the exasperated Professor Winch.

"Oh," said Mike. "But what has Merlin got to do with all this? He's not an ancestor of Zenith, is he?"

"I've really no idea, Mike," lied Professor Winch.

"But why would Merlin want to think up such evil magic? What use is the world to anyone if it's destroyed?" asked Mike.

"Good point, Mike, but that's for another time," said Professor Winch. "The only thing we know for sure was that Merlin, one time friend of King Arthur – the glorious founder of the WFW – turned against him and allied himself with, firstly, King Mark of Cornwall, and then the evil knight, Sir Mordred. Mark promised Merlin a high position in his court if he helped bring about Arthur's death, clearing the way for Mark to become King of all England. Although Arthur did die as a result of treachery, this was some time later. Mark's attempts to seize power failed, but the vainglorious Merlin soon found another willing ally in treason, the aforesaid Sir Mordred, and both were aided and abetted by the duplicitous Lady Morgana – at least for a brief period. Thankfully, Merlin's treachery was found out and he was eventually captured, but he soon escaped and evaded Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table for several years.

"He was eventually recaptured, tried and sentenced to death – but he escaped again, and this time he stayed free. It seems he had spent his various spells of freedom, pardon the pun, increasing his powers and formulating the Chaotagens, which he then hid. He then committed the spells to parchment. That parchment became *'Trevelyans Book of Applied Chaotagens'*."

"Do you think that Zenith has found any of the Chaotagens yet, or even the wand?" asked Mike.

"No, I don't think so. If Professor Zenith could release any or all of the Chaotagens, he would immediately have let the world know he could easily do so, that is their real power, the threat of their being activated, although an evil and no doubt deranged mind may still do so. This is despite knowing it could result in their own downfall, and very definitely so if it was the Solar Chaotagen. There has been no communiqué from Professor Zenith, for want

of a better word, so it is safe to assume that even if he has located the Chaotagens he most certainly has not got the wand. I feel even more sure of this, because the page from the book listing its location was torn out some years ago, accidentally I believe," replied Professor Winch. (For some unknown reason Professor Winch had the fingers of his left hand crossed).

"But do you know where the wand is, Professor? Or the Chaotagens?" asked Mike.

"No, Mike, I do not, but I bitterly regret making Professor Pendragon swear to me that he would not – as I myself swore not to – open the book to read its contents. This was out of fear for what might happen and what evil magic might just escape. I may have done more good by doing the opposite."

"But you weren't to know that, Professor."

"No, Mike, I wasn't to know that, but what I do know is, I've spent long enough on this infernal machine. Please do as Professor Stannich asks of you, and I will see you very soon. Goodbye for now!"

A rushed Mike said to Professor Winch, "Er – Professor, can I just ask you one thing before you go? Why is Professor Zenith after me, if he can control or even destroy the world?"

Professor Winch gathered saliva on his tongue, tightened his mouth muscles, and went: "SSSSCCCCCHHHHWWWWCCCTTTTTHSCWHHHWSCWH-HTTTHHH SORRY, MIKE. LINE BREAKING UP. BYE!"

Mike lay there, more confused than ever before, even more so than when he had learned that he was a wizard, as were every twentieth generation of his family. There was now all of this to get his head round, most of which he thought he would never understand; but then he had a thought. 'If there is supposed to be no other magic because of the risk of breaking the Federation's spells, how are you able to use a telemagickeraph to contact me at the Academy?'

"Because, Mike, I am the boss. Goodbye!"

21

High Spirits

AS MIKE was doing his best to relax in his temporary haven, Professor Gabriel Winch summoned to his office his deputy, Professor Ezekiel Creek. This was to discuss recent developments.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice, Ezekiel, and I do apologise for disrupting your lesson, but I am afraid it is urgent. Please – do sit down and have a drink – I think you'll need it."

"Er – thank you, Headmaster, I think I will. Thank you." He sat down and poured himself a brandy.

Professor Winch joined his hands together in a nervous fashion and twiddled his fingers. He watched as his friend took his first sip.

"I'm not a happy man, Ezekiel, far from it. For the first time as head of this school, or indeed, throughout my whole career, I have had to lie to a student."

"Lie, Gabriel? To whom? About what?" replied Professor Creek.

"To young Miller."

"To Michael Miller? Why? I thought Miller was at Krickenstaltz. I thought that was as safe as anywhere could possibly be?!"

Professor Winch took a deep breath, furrowed his eyebrows, and sighed.

"I have lied to Miller because I fear he might do something rash before we can get to him."

But Professor Creek was still puzzled.

"But what has happened, Headmaster? Why is Michael in such danger?"

"Ezekiel, you of all people know that when we say something is permanent, we are really saying that we think it is, or we hope it will be. No-one in the world, whether wizards or ordinary folk, can do something regardless of how much thought or how much power goes into it, and really know that the situation will remain always as they wish it to be. Krickenstaltz is indeed the safest stronghold the world has ever known and ever will know, if it was destroyed right now, that fact would still not change. However, dark powers are gathering once again as we speak, and I cannot guarantee that they will not locate the Academy, therefore I cannot guarantee that Mike, or anyone else would always remain safe there."

Ezekiel understood most of what Professor Winch was saying, but was still uncertain of Mike's involvement.

"But Headmaster, what exactly has young Miller got to do with all this?"

Professor Winch gave a wry smile, but again sighed.

"As you have probably guessed already, it is all to do with our old friend, Professor Zenith. It was his scheming which saw Mike go to Romania, and his

trickery which brought Mike into contact with Professor Pendragon. This was no coincidence. Add to this his known penchant for magic weapons of mass destruction, and you get the picture.

"It may come as a shock to you, Ezekiel, but both Aloysius Pendragon and Michael, are distant cousins. That's nothing in itself of course, but if we consider Professor Pendragon's bloodline. . . ?" He left this last sentence in the form of a question, which he hoped would result in his good friend realising the implications.

Ezekiel Creek, although privy to much confidential information, was not fully aware of the nuances of the periodical nature of Merlin's magic powers when manifesting themselves in a member of the Miller family, nor of Mike's exact ancestry. Rather ironically, Ezekiel Creek may have learned a great deal more about things centuries long past, if only he had been on speaking terms with Edwin Cornstone, who was only too aware of the whole sorry indeed tragic saga. Professor Winch resumed twiddling his fingers, and waited. Eventually. . .

"THE LINE OF PENDRAGON! THEY ARE BOTH DESCENDANTS OF KING ARTHUR! But how can this be, Headmaster? Aloysius Pendragon yes – but Mike Miller?! Incredible!"

"Yes, Ezekiel, incredible. It would appear that whereas Aloysius, as we know, is a direct descendant through the male line, Mike's lineage has been disguised by the marriage of Arthur's niece, Elsipeth, to a commoner, one Michael the Miller of Denbrook – just outside Glastonbury in 532 AD. More importantly, this means that despite the weakened bloodline over the centuries, Mike, along with Aloysius, are the only remaining members of the House of Pendragon, or at least the only ones known to us. Add this to the evil Professor's own ancestry, the House of Trevelyan, and that, my dear friend, is why Zenith is so intent on their destruction."

Professor Creek was astounded, and not just at both Mike and Aloysius being of the House of Pendragon.

"If I've understood correctly, Headmaster, not only are Miller and Pendragon both relatives of King Arthur, but now you are telling me that we're witnessing a modern day vendetta! Absolutely incredible! Unbelievable! But why does Zenith want to release the Chaotagens? Surely he doesn't need to do that to destroy a young boy and an old man?"

"You miss the point, Ezekiel. I'm sure doing both would please Zenith in any circumstances, but I think his real goal is to gain power, far more power than he's ever had, and Mike and Aloysius might just be the ones to give it to him."

"How do you mean, Headmaster? How could they do that? *Why* would they do that?"

"To answer that, my old friend, I must first mention a few things, and, apologies in advance, it is also time for a little history lesson.

"It turns out that the Earth Chaotagen is buried deep in the ground underneath our very own Citadel of Krickenstaltz. Apparently, Merlin buried it

there before Krickenstaltz was ever conceived, shortly before being recaptured after one of his many escapes. It was lucky that he had been spotted by one of King Arthur's best scouts, otherwise Merlin may have been able to do his worst. Shortly before his death, Arthur instigated a new world-wide federation of wizards and their first commission was the construction of Krickenstaltz. The WFW, as it came to be known, formulated the most powerful magic spells ever, to ensure that the Earth Chaotagen remained buried for all time – and so that is the fundamental reason for the existence of this citadel.

"Although I am leader of the WFW, many secrets have been so well kept, generations of Federation chiefs and Council members have never known the complete truth concerning our origins. Our American friends have the best phrase for this – plausible deniability. Krickenstaltz is like the magic world's own Area 51. Mike asked me this morning whether I knew where the wand or the Chaotagens themselves where. I said that I did not. This was a partial lie, of course, but sadly necessary, as I did not want to scare the boy any more than he already is, but some of these facts I learned only a short while ago. Just before I contacted Mike, Aloysius told me about the Earth Chaotagen.

"This brings me to the real nitty gritty of the matter. How can Professor Zenith, or anyone else with similar evil ambitions, overcome the magic of Krickenstaltz and release the Earth Chaotagen? Here is one possibility: Rather alarmingly, there are exceptions to the exclusion of magic at Krickenstaltz. King Arthur made a decree that what he had done at Krickenstaltz and elsewhere, may only be undone by one of the House of Pendragon. Such are the vagaries of many spells, undone covers a multitude of sins. I am sorry to say that however unthinkable, there is a possibility that the protective magic can indeed be undone by either Aloysius or young Michael, due to their being of the House of Pendragon, which would then make it quite possible for any one or more of our enemies to infiltrate Krickenstaltz and pave the way for the Chaotagens to then indeed be triggered."

"Yes, but why would they wish to do that?" asked a sceptical Professor Creek.

"You don't quite follow me, do you? What I meant was that they could be put under one of Zenith's evil spells. They would still be one of the House of Pendragon, but they would have no option but to carry out his every command. The inherent evil at play would not emanate from either Aloysius or Michael, and so, put simply, the ancient magic set in place could well be negated. However, any evil genius who thinks to try this had best be prepared to hotfoot it rather quickly, as I am equally sure their intentions would be detected – eventually. The inherent magic of Krickenstaltz cannot be totally fooled, or at least that is my belief."

The penny finally dropped and Professor Creek grimly nodded. "Old Arthur never thought of that one, did he? The plonker."

"Now now, Zeke, don't be like that. No-one is perfect, not even kings who gave their lives for the cause of good and in the name of everything that is good and holy. No, no, although this was indeed a tragic mistake, it was also a noble mistake, because he just could not envisage one of his own ever yielding to the evil desires of an enemy and forced into a position to possibly destroy the world."

Professor Creek again nodded, and he also felt ashamed.

"Sorry, Headmaster, you are quite right. One thing though, getting into Krickenstaltz is one thing, and even knowing where the Earth Chaotagen is, is another, but what of the Chaotagen Wand?"

"I wondered how long it would be before you asked that. Now, please pour yourself another drink, I've more revelations for you which I've not yet managed to come to terms with myself."

Professor Creek was glad of the chance of a second brandy. He'd been shaken up, and unlike James Bond's favourite tipple, he was indeed stirred, very much so.

As he helped himself to rather a generous second glass, Professor Winch resumed his finger twiddling, ready to address his friend on the further recent happenings.

"After getting the message from Aloysius, I went to London to see His Worship the Mayor. He already knew most of what was going on of course, but I needed to speak with him and his staff to discuss what to do next. I did manage to convince His Worship that this was not just a British affair, and that I would be happy to offer the services of the WFW. He deliberated a while, question of national pride you know, but then I made him – er – then he saw sense and accepted my offer. That was my business at the Council concluded, so before coming back here I stopped off at my favourite pub in London, the Jam and Butty, in Chelsea."

Ezekiel Creek, half puzzled, half amused (and a little tipsy), gurgled into his brandy. "The Jam and Butty! That's not one of ours! What's up with the Severed Head?"

"Two reasons, Ezekiel. First of all, at such a perilous time, any places purely for magic folk are more likely to be spied on by our enemies – and a very minor point – my preferred tipple is brandy. I'm afraid even Merlin himself couldn't have brewed a decent cognac, not like our non-magic friends. It's their brandy you are drinking now, good stuff, eh?"

Ezekiel Creek gave his friend a quizzical look and thought to himself that as he was so fond of the stuff, the real reasons were no doubt the other way round in degrees of importance, but he couldn't complain, for it was indeed 'good stuff'. Ezekiel was impatient to hear the rest. "And so, Headmaster, you were in the pub. . . ?"

"Ah, yes, I was watching the news on the pub television, and a report came up about four archaeologists being found dead just outside Glastonbury. This was only hours after finding what they described as a mediaeval flute with the initials *'GT'* carved along the side, and a letter *'M'* in brackets next to

them."

"Geryth Trevelyan! Merlin! The Chaotagen Wand!" shouted Professor Creek – this time managing to badly stain Professor Winch's wall-planner on the wall behind him, with a swiftly despatched mouthful of brandy.

"It certainly seems so," said Professor Winch, wiping his right eye. "It can be no surprise that the flute, as they have mistakenly called it, was missing – stolen, no doubt – from the scene of the crime when the bodies of the archaeologists were found."

"Stolen by whom, though? Zenith?"

"I can understand why you would think that, but, I do not believe that it was Professor Zenith who murdered those people and stole the wand – nor do I believe it was his own followers."

"Who, then? Who else could it be? It would have to be someone from our world who first of all knew about the archaeologists and their work, AND knew it was Merlin's own wand that they had unearthed. That's a tall order."

"Or someone who had the location told to them by the self-same person who told Aloysius only hours ago?" suggested Professor Winch, and rather playfully at that, considering the dire circumstances.

"Sorry, not with you there, Gabriel, what do you mean exactly?"

"Prepare yourself for a shock, Ezekiel. The locations were revealed to us and unfortunately, most probably to the thieves, by none other than Merlin himself."

Ezekiel the Great – Splutterer Extraordinaire, returned for an encore. This time deciding that the remainder of the room's decor, a very tired looking grey, needed that deep brown sparkle that only the best cognac could provide.

"Merlin! Alive! How could this be?!" roared Professor Creek.

"Just give me a minute to wring out my hat and I'll tell you," replied Professor Winch. "Although it took a while to get him to calm down, early this morning Aloysius contacted me on the telemagickeraph to give me an update on his efforts to trace the Book of Chaotagens. Quite by accident he came across Merlin, alive, but very ill, dying it would seem, in some remote mountain hideout."

"But how did Professor Pendragon get Merlin to tell him the locations of the Chaotagens and the wand? Was it perhaps some sort of deathbed confession?" asked Professor Creek.

"Close, but not exactly," replied Professor Winch. "I am sorry to say that I am not the only one who has lied today, Ezekiel. Our good friend Aloysius has – er – fibbed for the good of the world. He told Merlin that he would restore him to full health and strength and that he would regain his powers, if he told him where the Chaotagens and the wand could be found. Merlin was not aware of recent events, ironically perhaps of his own making, in ancient times, as well as now, so he still assumed that the wand was buried somewhere in Glastonbury, but he did tell Aloysius where the Chaotagens are. It was a gamble – but a very necessary gamble."

"Can he be believed? Could he be playing games with the Professor? Or maybe he's working with Zenith and knows more than he's letting on?"

"Ah, yes, Professor Zenith. It would make sense: same family, both as good as exiled in the same country, but sometimes, Ezekiel, it's all down to luck, plus Zenith being true to form. Merlin is not likely to have had the power to know of the actions or whereabouts of his evil kin. No doubt Zenith would consider someone in Merlin's position as being washed up, past it, and so on. I don't even think he's given him a second thought because of the trouble he went to in getting the book. Zenith's disdain for his own kind or kin, can frequently work for us and against himself – or we got lucky. Either way, I think we can believe Merlin and this also leads me to believe it is not Professor Zenith who now has the wand."

"It still doesn't answer who did steal the wand, Headmaster. Do you actually know who this was, or is this part still a mystery?"

"The simplest of logic tells us that for someone to have stolen something, they either had to have already known where the item in question is, or they had stumbled upon it accidentally. After musing on this, I decided I favoured the former – up to a point. It is now my belief that the thieves gleaned this information from Merlin – but indirectly rather than directly hearing it from the man himself, thus allowing Merlin to remain in ignorance of much of the current chain of events. So – to conclude: it would not surprise me in the least if a certain gang of brigands, once they knew its location, seized the opportunity to steal the Chaotagen Wand, and are – at this very minute – speeding on their way to bargain with Professor Zenith. If this happens, the process of destruction can – God forbid – begin."

"But who exactly, Headm-master?" asked an impatient Ezekiel Creek, but with a slight slur which did not go unnoticed.

"I'm not sure if it's the right. . ." Professor Winch trailed off as he noticed that his good friend and colleague was, on the one hand deep in thought, but on the other had adopted a blank expression with glazed eyes.

Ezekiel Creek commenced muttering to himself, totally oblivious to Professor Winch.

"Hmmmmmm – bizarre – very bizarre. Miller — Pendragon — Zenith — Merlin. Hmmmmmm – how bizarre . . . how did Zenith come to make the connection with young Michael?"

The headmaster knew that his second in command was deep in his own thoughts, talking to himself rather than addressing him. He also knew his old friend was now in his cups.

"Ezekiel, old chap? Ezekiel!"

"Hmmm? Oh, yes, Headhamster – er – HemHadster, morry, a lot to take in. You were swaying?"

"Yes, a lot to take in I'm afraid, and we're not finished yet."

Professor Ezekiel Creek was for the moment, fully focussed again, but for how long he could remain so was uncertain.

The Deputy Head was on his sixth rather generous glass of best cognac,

perhaps revised down to five to take into account the great artiste, Ezekiel the Splutterer – Extraordinaire.

Eventually, with glazed, rolling eyes, he tried to address Professor Winch.

"Whaaazzzzzzzzzz puzzzzzz hee hee hee puzzzzzzzzzzz ha ha ha ha! Puzz-puzz-puzz-puzz." He coughed, swallowed, gave out a quick snort before seeming to regain control, and tried again. "Whaaaaaaaa ha ha hee hee. W-what'sssssspuzzzz-puzz-puzz-puzz-puzz-uzzz haaaa!" In a last desperate attempt to get his words out, he stood up, took a deep breath and shouted quickly, "WH-WH-WH-WHAT'S B-B-BEEN HIC! P-P-PU-PUZZ-UZZLING M-M-ME H-HEAD–HIC! M-M-M-MASASS–ASS–ASS–TERERER! IS-IS-IS IS–IS-IZZIZZ—"

That was the last thing Professor Creek uttered before he collapsed. He fell backwards, banged his head on the wall, knocked himself unconscious, and ended up stretched out on the floor of Professor Winch's office, thus ending his musing on Professor Zenith being hot on the tail of Mike Miller.

Professor Winch stood up from his desk and peered over to see the drunken Professor Creek, snoring soundly. He spoke quietly to himself. "Oh dear, and we are so pressed for time and so much still to tell him. Still, he enjoyed the brandy."

As Professor Winch mused on the bizarre situation, his office door burst open – and in rushed Harry Gripweed and Daphne Llefevre.

"Wha's all this racket?! Fought you wuz in a bit of bovver there, 'Eadmaster! Yeeer!" exclaimed Daphne.

"Poor fellow, he's – er – caught the flu'. I would be most obliged if you would help him to his quarters. Thank you."

A mystified Daphne Llefevre and Harry Gripweed struggled with Ezekiel Creek, dragging him along the floor and out of Professor Winch's office – and the professor did nothing but shut the door straight after them. He had many disturbing things on his mind – good manners would have to wait.

22

Oops a Daisy!

MIKE CONTINUED to lie on his bed after speaking to Professor Winch via the telemagickeraph (the deluxe model). He had to keep reminding himself that despite going through a whole host of bewildering experiences, only a few hours had passed since talking to a budgerigar, travelling on a magic caravan, and ending up in some mediaeval citadel with the evil Professor Zenith looking for him.

With all these things going around and around in his mind, Mike's brain began to weary, quickly followed by his body, and very soon he was in a deep sleep. Mike was roused three hours later by someone banging and knocking on the door and a voice shouting his name.

"Mike – wake up. Mike! It iz lunchtime! Mike!"

There were more knocks, more bangs and the same pleas. Eventually Mike stirred and sat up. He waited for the customary grogginess to fade and after a short while he recognised Marina's voice.

"OK, OK, I'm awake – just give me a sec'."

Mike made the catastrophic mistake of stepping off the bed before he had really gathered his senses. As he went to put one foot down on the floor, his other foot became jammed in the metal grilling between the bedposts, He then fell right out and banged his head on the hard floor. The force of his ejection was enough for his foot and the bed to part company, causing the bed to shunt right into the rickety wardrobe. This tottered and then fell down – first on top of the bed – but then the two doors were flung wide open, the wardrobe careered off the bed and landed upside down right on top of Mike. This was not the end of it. One of the doors came right off its hinges, this in turn collapsed right on top of the little table holding a bowl of freezing cold water, the bowl flew off the table and shattered as it landed on the floor, but not before its contents had been rapidly jettisoned and where else could the icy water go but through a newly wrenched, splintered gap in the bottom back panel of the wardrobe – and right into Mike's face. This had the immediate effect of transposing Mike's lower octave groans of confusion to a shrill scream as he came into unexpected contact with the ice-cold water.

Upon hearing the crashing bed and furniture and Mike's shock reactions of varying pitch, Marina rushed into the room.

"Mike! Mike! Vot 'az 'appened?! Are you OK? Mike!"

Marina surveyed the room with disbelief.

The bed was out of place, the wardrobe was upside down right in the middle of the room, and the table and bowl were in smithereens, but there was no sign of Mike.

"Mike! Mike! Ver are you? Ver 'az you gone? MIKE!"

Marina's desperate shouts were met with muffled sounds coming from beneath the wardrobe.

Marina tried to lift the wardrobe off Mike, but as she did so the bottom panel came loose and clonked him – just as he raised his head to say he was all right.

"O', Mike! Are you all right? I am zo zorry. 'Ere, let me 'elp you up."

Marina, this time with far greater care, lifted the offending wardrobe off Mike, pushed it to one side and helped him up on to his bed. Mike just sat there groaning to himself. Marina rushed out of the room, found a towel, raced back in and dried his face. Mike gave a spluttery cough to get rid of the dust in his mouth.

"Thanks, Marina, I'm OK now. I'll be OK."

Marina shook her head. "I must get zumvon to 'ave a look at you, Mike, you may 'ave broken zumzing."

"Er – I don't think so, Marina, I just feel a little sore, that's all."

Marina again shook her head and was about to leave to get help, but Mike decided it wasn't necessary.

"Honest, I feel fine. Look – I'll prove it."

Mike got up, held out his arms like a tightrope walker – and began to walk towards the door in a straight line in a hugely exaggerated manner.

Just as Marina was about to say she hadn't accused him of being drunk, Mike slipped on some small pieces of shiny broken wood from his wardrobe and fell and cracked his head, hard on the solid oak door. This time, Mike gave out a very loud "Ow! Ow! Ow!", and put his hands to his head, which was now bleeding.

"O', Mike, 'owever did zey let you into 'Emlock 'All?! Come on, let me 'elp you back on ze bed. Allez Oop!" (Mike managed a quick chortle through his pain. 'Allez oop!' he mentally repeated to himself). "OK, Mike, use my – 'ow you say, inkychuff, to try and stop ze bleeding, and you must stay 'ere vile I get 'elp. Vot vill ze Profezzor zink ov me if ve come back and you've fallen out ze vindow?"

Mike dutifully lay back again. He held the handkerchief to the cut on his head but noticed that the bleeding was far less than at first. He carefully lifted the handkerchief away, gave it a few seconds, and dabbed the cut with his finger. Apart from the expected moistness of the cut, the bleeding itself had stopped.

"Good!" Mike said to himself, and yet again got up from his bed.

With Marina's advice now disregarded, Mike adopted the mien of a cat burglar and began rooting in his bags to see if there was any food, perhaps prepared for him the night before by Barry Wimpole. After a minute or so, Mike's aches, pains and cuts were momentarily forgotten, and with the aplomb of much glitzier kin – the stage magician – he pulled out a bag of from his suitcase, but then. . .

"AHA! A STUDENT WHO DOES NOT DO AS HE IS TOLD! Get back on the

bed, my lad! Now!"

Mike, not yet aware of the speed at which the regular incumbents of Krickenstaltz can move around the place, reacted totally out of shock and put his hands up and stood stock still. Mike may have been still but the peanuts were not. They left the bag at approximately twice the speed of sound, flying over Mike's shoulder. Most zoomed past his mysterious guardian and landed on the floor, but quite a few landed right in Ernst Stannich's beard and stayed there.

Mike, still acting like an extra from a POW film did not dare to turn around – but he did hear a crunching sound.

"Mmmm – peanuts – love 'em. Sorry for giving you a fright, Mike, but you really must do what we ask you, it is for your own good. Turn around, Mike, m'lad – and put your hands down, this isn't Colditz. Let's have a look at you."

Mike turned round and saw Ernst Stannich and Marina standing there. Mike was glad to see that despite Marina's disapproving countenance, Ernst was actually smiling. Mike realised an apology was due.

"Sorry, Marina, it won't happen again. Sorry, Ern' – er – Mr – er. . . "

"None of that nonsense with me, Mike, it's Ernst to all who know me. Seriously though, get back on your bed and I'll see whether you can go off to lunch."

"Are you a doctor, then?" asked Mike, as Ernst gave him a brisk but professional examination.

"Yes, Mike, as a matter of fact I am, but I don't have a practice or anything."

"That figures," said Mike.

"Oh – why's that?" said a mildly surprised Ernst.

"Well, we're all magic folk, aren't we? As long as there's someone who can do magic medicine, who needs human doctors?"

Ernst roared with laughter.

"Er – Mike, I'm human, too, you know!"

"Oh yeah, sorry!" said Mike, "I just meant that – er. . . "

Ernst didn't leave Mike struggling to explain. "I think I know what you mean, Mike, but you are quite wrong, I'm afraid. When it comes to healing you must think of magic as being like a supplementary medicine, and even then there are many cases where only non-magic cures are any use, and just as many occasions where neither are any good at all. I wish it were not the case, but there you are."

"Oh," said an embarrassed Mike who realised his ignorance in the matter, and knew yet again that he still had a lot to learn.

Ernst continued poking and prodding, lifting and dropping which was met with the occasional 'Ow!', from Mike, followed by, 'O' Mike, you iz big boy now, do be qviet vile you iz examinated.' Mike, in his underpants in front of Marina, was at far too much of an embarrassing disadvantage to even contemplate correcting her English.

Ernst finally finished giving Mike the once-over and Marina put a plaster over the cut on Mike's head. "And that's about it, Mike, you can get dressed now."

"And can I go?" asked Mike, who just as quickly realised he wouldn't know where to go to even if the answer was yes.

Ernst bobbed his head from left to right and scratched his chin as he weighed up the situation.

"Yes, I think so, Mike. You've had a couple of knocks but not too bad, and the cut is nothing to worry about, just a scratch, really. Apart from getting a few bruises and a scab on your bonce, you'll be fine and dandy. Yes, go off and get some lunch; bacon butties, is it?" He said this to Mike with a strange but friendly twinkle in his eye.

Ernst gave some instructions in his own language to Marina and turned to go. As an afterthought, he turned back to Mike.

"Watch yourself, young fella, my big brother's a great man but he has a lot on his mind at the moment, so he won't tolerate any youthful tomfoolery. OK?"

"OK, I won't get in any bother," promised Mike.

"Good lad, see you later."

"Bye. And thanks," shouted Mike, as Ernst strode quickly out of the room.

"Follow me, my little friend. Let'z see if ve can get to ze dining room in one piece!"

Mike, unaware of rapidly developing bumps and purple bruising to his face and head, gladly followed Marina out of the door in search of his bacon butties.

23

Bacon on the Brain

MIKE FOLLOWED MARINA out of the room and down the corridor to the left.

After passing five large oak doors, all the same of course, she finally stopped outside the sixth and turned round to Mike.

"Pleeze pay attenzun, Mike, az I need to show you zumzing. It vill be confuzing at first, but zen it vill become clearer, 'opefully."

Marina quickly slid all three metal slats which kept the door locked, from right to left. It seemed far easier than Mike thought it would be. Marina pushed the door open and went in.

"Follow me, pleeze."

Mike followed her in and was surprised to find — absolutely nothing. The room was bare. No furniture, no windows and the four walls and even the floor and ceiling were all made of the same burnt, jagged, mis-shapen rock that Mike had first seen on the outside walls of the Academy.

Mike was about to ask Marina what had they gone in there for, but before he could, Marina said in a brisk, business like voice, "Outzide again, pleeze," and they wheeled around and walked back outside. Marina closed the door but didn't lock it. Mike gave Marina a very mysterious look as he hadn't a clue what was going on. She then said to him, "'Ave you your tranzmutagen, pleeze?"

Mike had forgotten all about it, but quickly remembered it was around his wrist. "Er – yes – here it is." He passed Marina the crystal model of the Krickenstaltz Academy, and wondered what she was going to do.

"Votch very carevully, Mike, ziss iz very important."

Expertly carved in reverse-relief into the wood at the top right of the door, a little like a mould or 3D template, was a perfect indentation in the shape of the Academy. Upon seeing this, Mike guessed that the two matched up to produce some sort of spell or magic effect. Marina placed the crystal into it, and after a little jiggling had set it firmly into place.

"I vont you to concentrate and say to yourself, 'Dining Room', and zen open ze door. Try, pleeze."

Although Marina did not suggest it, Mike closed his eyes as it seemed the right thing to do. He quietly said to himself, 'Dining Room', opened his eyes again and pushed open the door.

"Go in, pleeze," said Marina.

Mike, with Marina following, walked back into the room. This time, bright rays of light hit Mike as he walked in. The light was from the sun blazing in through huge windows on the far side of the room.

The next thing Mike noticed was the noise. There were the unmistakeable sounds of people – many people, chattering away, laughing, even shouting as they sat at the tables and ate their meals. Mike had successfully used his transmutagen to get to the dining room.

The place was full. There were many wizards, witches, goblins, elves and even a couple of what looked like English gentlemen from the City – in pinstriped suits, with their bowler hats and brollies hung up on the stand next to their table.

The walls were no longer burnt, jagged and sinister but were properly decorated with wallpaper that Mike thought would not look out of place in most ordinary restaurants. The ceiling had been painted cream-coloured, a huge chandelier hung down from the centre, and the floor was covered in highly polished wooden tiling.

Mike stood there just trying to take it all in, and didn't notice that Marina was trying to tell him something. Instead, he turned to her and said, "Fantastic!"

"Yez, Mike, fabtasteec. OK, zen – listen, pleeze, before you 'ave lunch. Your tranzmutagen vill get you to 'ere and back again. Pleeze remember zat you must use ze tranzmutagen only in ze vay I've shown you, use only ziss one and no-one else'z, and on outgoing journeys only from ze sixth oak door. Can you remember all zat, Mike?"

"Er – yes – I think so," replied Mike, who was actually far too distracted and hungry to take it all in properly.

"One last zing, Mike, pleeze look on your wrist."

"Er –my wrist? Oh, OK." On lifting his sleeve, Mike noticed that his transmutagen was back on his wrist. "Wow!"

From the far end of the dining room, a young lady came out of a small doorway on the right and started walking towards them. She was older than Mike, but still a teenager, seventeen years old. She was pretty, had long blonde hair and gave a broad smile as she reached Mike and Marina.

"Hello, Marina, hello, Mike, pleased to meet you," She shook hands with Mike, who blushed, a little.

In return, she was curious about Mike's almost ragged, dusty and even bloody appearance. Even more noticeable was the various bruising which had rapidly developed since Mike's escapade a short while earlier, but she didn't mention it.

"Mike, ziss iz my gud friend, Ellen. She verks 'ere in ze dining room and vill look after you now. I must get back to verk myself. Bye, Mike, don't tip all ze tables up and smash ze plates, vill you? Bye, Ellen, see you later."

Mike blushed even more and Ellen smiled wryly to herself, wondering whether Professor Stannich had agreed to take Mike on, in some sort of last desperate measure to keep an unruly juvenile on the right side of the law.

"OK, Mike, let's show you to your table. Don't look so worried, I've a nice surprise for you."

Mike followed Ellen to the other end of the dining room. He was surprised

to find he was being stared at as he passed by all the tables with their varied occupants. He didn't know why this was, and with the noise from the diners and the plates clattering in the kitchens, he didn't hear the comments from one of the City gents as they surveyed his battle scarred countenance.

"Fighting at the Academy?! Dash it man! It just isn't cricket! What's the idea of allowing any old ragamuffin in? Has old Ren lost his marbles?!"

Ellen and Mike reached the very end table, and Mike was surprised to find two children, a boy and a girl of roughly his own age, already sitting there, presumably waiting for their meal.

Ellen introduced them.

"Mike, meet Juliette and Vincent Stannich. You two pests, meet Mike Miller. They're cheeky so and so's, Mike, but great fun, especially this one – isn't that so, Vince?" She ruffled Vincent's hair as she said this.

"'Ere! – I've only just combed that! Get back to the kitchen where you belong, cooky!"

At this, Juliette just laughed but then shook hands with Mike.

"Erm – Mike – I hope you don't mind my asking, but have you been in an accident or something? Are you here to recuperate?" asked Juliette.

But the over-imaginative Vincent had already decided that Mike could not have been in just any old accident, and certainly not just wrestled with his creeky furniture. Unfortunately, for the seniors of the magic community of Krickenstaltz, the citadel's almost daily dealings with an arch-enemy was not something they could keep a secret from the ears of any youngsters who happened to also reside in this top-secret establishment.

"Go on! You can tell us! We'll keep it a secret! You've been rescued just in time from a life or death battle with Professor Zenith, haven't you?! Brill!" shouted the ultra-clandestine Vincent, all over the dining room. (At this there were several protests from some of the more sedate wizards from nearby tables, who did not like noise at the dining table).

"Vincent! Don't embarrass Mike. Can't you see he's obviously here to get over a terrible ordeal?! The last thing he needs is for you to be shouting his business everywhere."

Mike felt rather a fraud at their semi-misperceptions of his presence at Krickenstaltz, although he was mystified as to why they were being quite so dramatic.

Ellen decided to intervene at this point.

"Ahem! Manners, you two." She made an eye gesture, focussing on an empty seat at the table, and then looked at Juliette, who thankfully was quick on the uptake.

"Mike, I'm so sorry, please sit down and eat with us, you must be starving."

"Er – OK – but I'd rather use a knife and fork!"

Straightaway, Vincent gave out a huge laugh followed by Juliette, but not Ellen. "Did I miss something? What's so funny?"

"You know," said Vincent, "Juliette said to Mike to eat with us and Mike said

. . . oh never mind!"

Ellen, totally confused, wasted no more time on deciphering what she decided was no doubt a bad joke.

"I'll go back and get your lunches. Vince, don't badger Mike, you can see how bad a time of it he's had. He needs peace and quiet to get his strength back. OK?"

Ellen turned to go back to the kitchen, which was through the opening on the right hand side of the dining room. What she didn't see or hear was Vincent pulling faces and saying in a mocking, whining voice not in the least like Ellen's, 'Don't badger Mike, he needs his peace and quiet!'

After Ellen's comment, Mike decided he would have to put them all straight on exactly why he was there, but that time wasn't now. Not while he was so hungry. Such revelations could wait.

Although the laughter and the natural friendliness of Vincent and Juliette broke the ice to some degree, Mike still felt awkward with his new acquaintances, but felt he had to say something.

"Er – are you having bacon butt – er – sandwiches as well, then?"

They both gave broad, knowing smiles.

"You can 'ave 'em if you want, Mike, but we're both having roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Did you ask for bacon butties?" said Vincent.

"Er – no – I didn't ask for anything, I just thought we'd all be having the same thing. And what's so funny about bacon butties? Every time someone mentions bacon butties, someone else smiles or giggles."

Juliette smiled.

"OK, Mike, I'll put you out of your misery. Father – Professor Stannich – thinks all English people eat bacon butties all day long – nothing else."

"What?! You're joking! Why would anyone think that?!" exclaimed Mike.

Vincent, ever a one for telling and retelling stories, jumped in quickly so he rather than his sister could explain to Mike.

"You've heard of the Leprechaun Wars, haven't you? Well, during the siege of the Great Fen in the Second Leprechaun War, the leprechauns had the place totally surrounded for months – they stole what they could of the livestock and burnt down all the crops. There was nothing left for the Fen people to eat but pigs, which was lucky for the Fen people, as pigs are considered bad luck by leprechauns, some anyway, mainly the ones from more remote areas.

"Dad was a Commander in the Eastern Division of the Magic Army who were sent to lift the siege. Ever since then, Dad thinks all English people only ever eat bacon."

This amused Mike, who perhaps deliberately did not let on that he'd never heard of the first Leprechaun War never mind the second. "What about boiled ham and roast pork, then?"

"Nope, not to Dad, no such thing, it's all bacon. Oh, and you missed out sausages," said Juliette, who knew Mike was joking. "I know it seems daft, Mike, but don't try and put Father right on this, he won't be told by us, by

Uncle Ernst, or anyone that he's wrong. It's gone on for so long that we've just given up and agree with him."

Vincent, who has the attention span of a sleeping goldfish, quickly bored of the bacon saga. He was really aching to interrogate Mike further on his life or death exploits and was in no mood to comply with the wishes of Ellie the Snitch. He was inclined to call her this, especially after being ordered to his father's office time and time again due to Ellen's untimely interference, or concern, as she preferred to call it. Although if Vincent was totally honest, he would have to admit he fully deserved most (but perhaps not all) of the carpetings suffered in front of an irate Ren Stannich. These were for pulling pranks which would have tested the patience of Job, and perhaps even Ned Flanders.

In the ensuing momentary silence, Vincent decided that Mike's nonchalance interspersed with the occasional blink of the eye was really secret code. He looked at Mike, waiting for the one tell-tale sign which really meant, 'Go on! Ask me how Zenith threw me from the roof of his citadel, and how I survived an attack of man-eating wolf-whales!' Mike scratched his arm – twice! This was it!

Juliette saw the tell-tale signs – mouth slowly opening with a mind no doubt full of visions of Professor Zenith and other heinous villains in hot pursuit of Mike Miller.

"Vincent! I know that look! Leave Mike alone or I'll tell Ellie myself."

Mike had a strained expression on his face, not just through being piggy in the middle between the two, but because Ellen had returned and was standing behind Juliette with a serving tray.

"Tell me what? What did I tell you, Vincent? Has he been bothering you, Mike?"

Mike and Vincent vied to get their explanation out first. Mike won.

"It's OK, honest. I don't mind what they ask me. Don't tell their father, will you? It was really me wanting to talk."

"Nice try, Mike, but I've known Vincent too long. Your last warning, greasy head, or I'll tell. Do you hear?"

Vincent gave half a nod of agreement which later on he would vaguely recall as being just a neck spasm.

"Hmmmm," said Ellen knowingly, "you'd better have this before it gets cold. Bacon sandwiches for you, Mike, is that right?"

The three just couldn't contain themselves and went into fits of laughter.

"Not again!" said Ellen. "What's so funny this time? Oh, Mike, you don't like bacon, is that it?"

"No, no, bacon's fine, honest," said Mike, suppressing a laugh. "It's just that – that. . . "

"It's Father again, Ellie, you know, English people? Bacon?" said Juliette, helping Mike out.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mike, I can get you something else, but the Professor did say that—"

"No, no, it's OK, I love bacon. Honest, it's no problem."

"Oh well, if you're sure. . . "

Ellen put the plates on the table.

Vincent and Juliette had roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and heaps of potatoes, carrots and peas. Mike's meal was four huge sizzling slices of bacon with two thick slices of bread and butter.

24

A Vagabond at the Dining Table

MIKE AND HIS TWO NEW FRIENDS chatted merrily away as they ate their lunch. They spoke of this and that, told daft jokes, everything but what they really wanted to talk about but couldn't because of strict instructions for Juliette and Vincent to let Mike get some peace and quiet. Vincent felt this most of all, and could only barely restrain himself from steaming right into Mike.

Although still feeling a little sore from accidentally trashing his room and himself, Mike really didn't mind telling the two whatever they wanted to know. He would have liked the opportunity to explain to them, that on this occasion he hadn't quite been pulled from the jaws of death and rushed to the haven of Krickenstaltz. He was still a bit flummoxed though, as to why a sticking plaster on his head could possibly conjure up such dramatic images.

The meal continued.

Juliette, who was the better mannered of the siblings, waited until she'd swallowed each mouthful before saying anything.

"So, Mike, how long do you think you will be with us?"

"Er – I dunno, really," replied Mike, "I shouldn't really be here at all, and I think someone from home is coming out to get me, so I don't think I'll be around too long."

"I hofe you fay fong efuff, vo fee can fow u effyfink," said Vincent.

"Vincent, don't speak with your mouth full!" demanded Juliette.

"Sorry, what I said was – I hope you stay long enough so we can show you everything."

"I'd like to, but it all depends on how long it takes Professor Winch – er – my headmaster, to get here. As I said, I don't think it'll be that long," replied Mike.

"What's your headmaster got to do with it? You haven't been playing truant, have you? All the way out here just to skive off school!" said a well impressed Vincent.

"No, no, nothing like that. I was actually on my way to Bucharest when we had to – er – make a detour."

Mike realised that maybe he shouldn't be so open after all. He wasn't bothered himself, but he wasn't sure what his worried headmaster and travelling companions would think about him relating everything that had happened the night before, to two other children.

"Foff affened? Fuff foke fown?" asked Vincent.

Mike guessed what his food-fuelled words were. "Yes, that's it, the bus broke down." Unfortunately, he hadn't realised that Vincent was just joking,

and then he heard Juliette saying quietly to herself, 'Bus broke down? A bus? To here from London?'

Mike blushed. He felt as if he'd been caught out in a lie and didn't know what to do, even though he certainly wasn't lying, just simplifying the truth – and a bus and a caravan were not that different, in a way. After a second or two musing, Juliette just gave a little shrug which seemed to say, 'Oh well, nothing to do with me.'

Mike decided it timely to take their mind off his business and ask about theirs.

"Is Professor Stannich your real father, then, not your step-father or anything?"

"Yes, Mike, of course he is! Why do you ask that?"

"Oh – er – sorry, but I just thought he looked quite – er. . . "

"Old?" said a totally un-offended Vincent.

"Er . . . yeah," said Mike reluctantly.

Thankfully, Juliette was not offended either, just surprised.

"I suppose he does look too old to be a father of teenagers, but it's like a tradition for magic folk around here: older men marry much younger women. This is because they believe that the wisdom of age is passed on to their children, or something like that."

"Oh," said Mike, who suddenly realised that someone was missing from the conversation, and before his brain had a chance to consider the preferred protocol he just came straight out and said it.

"Where is your mother, then? Does she not live here or anything?"

There was an awkward silence, but Juliette eventually replied, "You weren't to know, Mike, so don't feel bad for asking about her when I tell you this: our mother was murdered by an evil warlock when we were babies. I can just about remember what she looked like but I don't think Vincent can remember an-n-n-n-yth-th-thing." Tears welled up in her eyes and she began to sob. In her embarrassment she covered her face.

It is at times like these that the better qualities Vincent has in him comes to the fore. He reached across the table and gently placed his hand on his sister's arm. "Don't cry, Sis, it's OK, it's OK."

Mike felt absolutely terrible. He just didn't know what to do.

"I'm so sorry for upsetting you, I didn't mean to. I just wish I'd kept my mouth shut." He put down his cutlery and in his own misery, bowed his head and quietly sighed.

Ellen came back over to their table with a jug of lemonade for the three. She immediately saw that there was a problem.

"What's gone on here?! Vincent, have you upset your sister again?"

"Er–no,actually – it was me," owned up Mike, who explained the conversation of the last few minutes.

"Come on, Jules, let's go into the kitchen. Mike, Vince, finish your meals, she'll be OK."

"I'm sorry, I really am," said Mike.

"No need, Mike, she'll be as right as rain in a few minutes. Please, finish your meals and have some lemonade."

Vincent regained his appetite immediately, but Mike did not and pushed his plate to one side, although he did have a glass of lemonade.

Vincent realised how bad Mike was feeling, and tried to cheer him up.

"Come on, Mike, stop worrying. Quite a few people mention Mum and she always reacts like this. Cheer up, she won't think any worse of you for asking, you know."

Mike didn't believe him and just gave Vincent a blank look. An awkward few minutes ensued, punctuated by the occasional sip of lemonade for both of them.

Ellen eventually returned with Juliette.

"Here you are! As good as new!" She gave Juliette a hug and went back to her work.

"Welcome back, blubber face!" said Vincent, at which Mike was horrified.

"Ah, shut it, emptyhead!" retorted an invigorated Juliette.

Mike, more out of relief than joy gave a big smile and said, "You're all right, then?"

"Of course I am! I feel daft as a brush for crying, but as little bruv says, that's what girls are best at. Ain't that right, no-brain?"

"Fuff you fate!" said Vincent, busy tackling the two remaining slices of Mike's cold, rapidly congealing bacon.

As the last of the lemonade was poured into Vincent's glass, he realised that as they would all be going back to their rooms very shortly, this could be his one and only chance to get some amazing tales of derring-do from Mike. Vincent quite often calculated the risk of transgressing the law, the law that is, as laid down by his long-suffering father, as well as Ellie the Snitch, and even Juliette. Based purely on the fact that he might never see Mike again due to his guardians possibly turning up sooner rather than later, he decided it was worth the risk, he would simply accept whatever punishment came his way after being found out. It was now or never.

"Go on, Mike! Tell us who beat you up and left you for dead? Was it the evil Professor Zenith? Did leprechauns drop you in the Swamp of Eternal Agony? Were the trolls about to slice you up? Were there any wolf-whales? Go on, Mike, it's worth a million thick ears, I don't care!"

Mike was shocked, especially after the repeated warnings Vincent had received, and that was just in the last hour or so. He had just taken the last gulp of lemonade and as he heard Vincent's impassioned plea, he spluttered and coughed and sent a fountain of lemonade arching through the air and over to the middle table occupied by our two City gentlemen.

The reaction from one of them made it very clear what had happened.

"What the devil?! Who does he think he is, Ezekiel Creek?! Damned hooligan! Knew he was trouble as soon as he came in! Well that's it! Come on, Peregrine, I've had enough!" He got up, wiped his face with his handkerchief, got his hat, coat and brolly and stormed out with a very

embarrassed Peregrine running after him. "You'll be hearing from my lawyers!" came the last parting shot, which was very faint due to the huge distance between the Dining Room and London EC1.

To Mike's amazement, everyone in the dining room cheered and did thumbs-up signs in Mike's direction.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

"You've just done us all a big favour there, Mike. No-one likes those two, the noisy one most of all – the other one just does as he's told," said Juliette.

"Yeah, the creep," said Vincent.

"I'm telling this one, if you don't mind!" demanded Juliette. "They've been coming here for years. I think they are from the Joint Communities Liaison Committee, so Father says. All they do is criticise the food, the staff, the service – they don't always pay their bills, and even when they do they demand their money back after ordering and eating the best meals, which they then say was off or stale or something. Hopefully they won't be back, ever."

Juliette remembered what had made Mike cough up his drink in the first place. She turned to Vincent. "Hey, you! You're for it! How many times have you been told?!"

This time, though, Mike decided to finally own up, to a degree.

He still didn't really know why they thought he was in such trouble, but he thought if he explained what he could – the Sabbatical, the trip on the magic caravan, and the embarrassing carry on after waking up, then hopefully that would clear up any confusion. Like Vincent, he would run the risk of being told off, but that was later, not now.

Just over half an hour later the dining room was almost empty, the cleaner was mopping up around their feet, but the siblings would not leave until Mike had told them absolutely everything (so they believed). Vincent wanted to hear about Mike's disastrous attempts to rise from bed, again and again. He just couldn't believe that what he thought were near-fatal injuries inflicted upon Mike by Professor Zenith or another villainous fiend, were in reality, the cuts, bumps and bruises of his tatty wardrobe falling on him, and from his crashing into the door while trying to prove to Marina he was OK.

"And I thought you'd taken on Professor Zenith and The League of Mordred single handed – but all you did was fall out of bed when Marina shouted you for lunch! Flippin' 'eck, Mike, what do they call you back home – Mr Clumsy?!"

It may not have been the derring-do he had so badly wanted to hear, but Vincent just as easily settled for a good laugh when high drama wasn't on offer.

Juliette was more amused by events on the caravan.

"And Barry really talks like that all the time? It's not an act or anything? I'd love to meet him."

"Er – yes, he does, but he's a nice fella." Mike said this because he was feeling a little guilty.

In explaining about his trip with Barry, Fred, and Professor Pendragon, he did his best to imitate Barry in every way: the dropped aitches (h's), the mis-pronunciations, even the wrong words entirely. All this was rounded off with a glorious Cockney accent which to Juliette and Vincent was highly amusing, but Mike now felt as if he had had no right to mock someone who had been quite friendly and helpful to him, and so quickly decided to instead, show a little loyalty.

As for himself, he just couldn't believe that he looked so appallingly bruised. However, he had to believe it after Juliette went and fetched a small mirror from her room and brought it back for Mike to look at himself. No wonder everyone thought he had barely escaped with his life. Especially as the bruise just above the cut had changed into a strange, horrible mixture of purple, red, and blue and had swollen considerably since he first went to lunch. Add an assortment of other lumps and bumps, a black eye, a blood-soaked shirt and a torn pullover which Vincent diplomatically mentioned ('Oy, Mike! Your pullover's all ripped, mate!'), and Mike looked the epitome of a captured POW after an escape attempt. No wonder he'd put his hands up when Ernst caught him rummaging for food.

Vincent was lucky that Juliette had been so equally enthralled with Mike's story – she would not be telling Ellen who therefore would not be able to tell their father. The pair were also lucky that Ellen had reached the end of her shift without coming back into the dining room. They were confident that this would be the case, because today was Monday. On Mondays Ellen finished early so she could go to see her boyfriend, Gregor Ojstott, a corporal in the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment. Gregor had been one of the guards who rode as escort for Professor Stannich and brought Mike back to the Academy.

Marina appeared at the doorway where she and Mike had entered by earlier.

"Zorry, you lot, orders from ze boss. Ze cleaners 'ave complained zat you 'ave been too long and are in ze vay. Zey need to get ze place ready for dinner. So pleeze, take Mike viz you if you like, but you 'ave to go, zo pleeze, 'urry!"

Vincent spoke up quickly to stop Mike feeling awkward. "Don't worry, Mike, it's back to my room. I've got some scoff and pop and I'll tell you everything about this place. In fact, I've got something really amazing to tell you."

"I hope you're inviting me as well?" asked Juliette, who knew what Vincent was talking about, and didn't want to miss the look on Mike's face when Vincent told him.

Vincent, who at times like these reverted to Just William mode, hadn't planned on inviting Krickenstaltz's own Violet Elizabeth, but knew he couldn't really say no.

"Let's go, then. Stay close, you two, I'll use my TMG." (Mike later found out that this was a handy abbreviation of transmutagen).

"BEDROOM," said Vincent in a clear, loud voice. They walked through and found themselves in Vincent's bedroom.

25

So near and yet so Far

MIKE FULLY EXPECTED Vincent's room to be far better than his own: bigger, brighter, better furnished and so on, but it wasn't. Professor Ren Stannich was a stickler for equality and would not let his children have things easier at Krickenstaltz just because they were his children. This was very much to Vincent's disgust of course, but that's how it was. The room was the same, the tatty furniture was of equal dilapidation to Mike's, and the walls just as bare and the window just as dirty, and of course just as heavily barred.

"Make yourself at home, Mike, have a seat."

At least Vincent had three easy chairs in his room. On their last of course, but to Vincent 'Just William' Stannich, this seemed to make them even more comfortable, and much to Mike's surprise, the sunken cushions were indeed comfy as he sank down into them.

"Come on, Vince, get the goodies out, I never finished my lunch," said Juliette.

"And we all know why, don't we?!" said Vincent, unkindly.

"Now now, sarky, just get them sweets out of your wardrobe, chop-chop!"

"Hold your horses – hang on – yes, got 'em! One for you, one for you – and one for me," said Vincent, as he threw the two a packet of wine gums each.

As Vincent rummaged further for a bottle of lemonade to swill down, Mike said, "I know these sweets. I used to eat them a lot before I went to Hemlock Hall, still do when I'm at home. Don't you have any magic sweets here?"

"Oh, you don't know, do you?" said Juliette. "We're not allowed anything magic here, not even sweets. The only way we can get any goodies is when we've all been transmuting, or Uncle Ernst goes on his frequent trips abroad and he brings us back all sorts of non-magical stuff."

"I forgot about that," said Mike. "I was told a little about no unauthorised magic spells or things, but I didn't think that would include sweets."

Vincent gave a broad grin.

"Yeah, I know what you mean, Mike. Can you imagine the headlines: 'Professor Zenith holds world To ransom with a Wiggly Spearmint Tum!' As if!"

Vincent and Mike laughed out loud, especially Mike, as he had a tale to tell of such a sweet from his very first day at Hemlock Hall, but he thought it prudent not to tell them just yet, as Juliette was not best pleased.

"Look, you two, perhaps Dad is being over-cautious. Maybe we could eat

magic stuff and nothing would happen, but what if it did? Just imagine the tragedy it could cause? And who would get the blame? Sure, Dad would blame us – you, Vince, actually – but who would the world blame? Go on – who?"

"Er – Professor Zenith?" replied Mike.

"Ellen?" said Vincent, hopefully.

"No! You pair of numbskulls, Dad of course!"

"Of course, Da – er – your father," said Mike.

"Are you sure it wouldn't be Ellen?" hoped Vincent.

No more was said on the subject. Instead their mouths were busy engaging some seriously out of date wine gums and swilling down the gnarled un-biodegradable remnants with some equally seriously flat lemonade.

Vincent quickly forced down the last of his troublesome pretend bottle of claret, looked at Mike, and gave him a wicked smile.

"We were going to tell you something, weren't we? Remember?"

"Oh yeah, that's right. What is it?" replied Mike, beginning to feel a little suspicious.

Vincent loved the idea of suspense and didn't tell Mike anything straightaway. He turned to Juliette and said, "Well, Sis, do you want to tell him, or shall I?"

"Don't be mean, Vincent, just tell him!" pleaded Juliette, who seemed to have de-aged by about seven years as she giggled and clapped her hands in childish anticipation of Mike's reaction.

"What country are we in right now?" asked Vincent.

Mike was confused and suspected a wind up of some sort.

"Er – are you serious?"

Vincent repeated himself. "Go on! What country are we in right now?"

"Er – Romania," said Mike, wondering when the funnies were going to occur.

"Correct!" said Vincent.

"Is that it?!" said a totally mystified Mike.

"Hang on a mo – hang on. Right, where did we have lunch today?"

"In the dining room, of course."

"Yes, I know that!" said a vexed Vincent. "What country?!"

"Romania," replied Mike.

"Wrong!"

"What?! What do you mean, wrong?"

"I mean, Mike, we did not have lunch in Romania, nowhere near it!"

Mike, still thinking it to be some kind of big joke, did the only thing he could think of and joined in the way he thought he was supposed to.

"The Czech Republic, then?"

"No!"

"Italy?"

"No!"

Mike's geography was actually a little below par and he could only guess at which were the bordering countries to Romania. He guessed that Krickenstaltz must be situated right on the border between two or more countries of which Romania was obviously one of them. This would make it possible to sleep in Romania and go for his lunch in – well – wherever.

"Bulgaria!" shouted Mike, and he saw what he thought was a glint in Vincent's eye, he must have guessed right.

"Nope!" said Vincent.

Juliette had had enough. "Come on, Vince, tell him, or I will!"

"Oh all right, spoilsport. You're not going to believe this, Mike, but the dining room is in – wait for it – Australia!"

"Australia!" shouted Mike. "Australia?! It can't be, you're joking! How can it be in Australia?!"

"I dunno how, I just know it is," said Vincent.

Mike looked over to Juliette in the hope that sanity would prevail and she would tell Vincent off for being ridiculous, which would then bring this nonsense to a close. This did not happen.

"Honest, Mike, it's true," said Juliette, "the dining room is in Australia, but unlike thicko here I can tell you why, sort of."

"Wow!" said Mike.

Juliette, pleased to be seen yet again as the sensible and more informative of the two, began her explanation.

"The thing is, Mike, over the centuries, evil magicians have managed to increase their power many times. At one point in the Middle Ages – warlocks – er – bad wizards (at this, Mike lifted his eyebrows as if to mentally protest at the implied ignorance of what side of the fence a warlock was on, despite in reality, not having a clue), were threatening to find Krickenstaltz and destroy it. The magic power needed to keep the place safe had to be increased dramatically. The only way this has been achieved is by magically breaking up Krickenstaltz – but not really – if you know what I mean. Apart from the original building, all other parts of Krickenstaltz have been transported by magic to other countries. This leaves the headquarters of the WFW with just the job of keeping the Academy here safe, while its international branches look after different parts, we call them annexes, in their own countries, but the way it's been done means it can still function in many different ways as if it was still altogether in one place."

Mike was totally flabbergasted by what he had just heard.

"Absolutely brilliant! So that means if I want to go to, say, the library, or to the swimming pool, I simply use my transmutagen and end up on the other side of the world?!"

"Some of the time, yes. I think some things are a lot nearer, but I'm not sure where absolutely everything is."

Vincent was delighted to hear this. "So, teacher's pet Juliette M Stannich, otherwise known as little Miss Egghead, doesn't know everything after all. Naa naa na naa naa!"

"Do you know, then?" asked Mike, who was well experienced in diffusing rows between friends.

"Er – no," said a rapidly reddening Vincent.

"What about our rooms? Why aren't they in another country?" asked Mike.

Vincent conceded defeat and gestured to his sister to carry on.

"I think it's because the Academy itself has got to retain at least some administrative offices, as well as some basic amenities. Let's just imagine that Father's office was not here, but in . . . I don't know, let's say, Upper Volta, for example. Then imagine there was a panic on back here, and for whatever reason the transmutagens didn't work. Father would then be stranded abroad. And when he did get back who knows what might have happened. Apart from a possible catastrophe, he would also run the risk of losing his job and getting the boot. So I think they make sure everyone who works here actually lives here as well."

"That makes sense, I suppose," said Mike.

For the next hour or so, Mike's enthralment with the whole idea of lunch in Australia and going to the pictures in Iceland and supper in Los Angeles, resulted in him bombarding Juliette and Vincent with question after question. This was in much the same demented way that Vincent had grilled him earlier about his non-existent dip in a deadly bog, fighting off blood-drooling trolls and a howling and seemingly very wet pack of wolf-whales.

With much laughter between the three of them – and a great deal of contradiction and bickering between Vincent and his sister – Mike slowly pieced together most of what he could do or couldn't do while at Krickenstaltz, conveniently forgotting that he may be rescued any time now.

Mike learned that his transmutagen had only limited access, far less than either Juliette's or Vincent's. Mike's was designed, according to Juliette, for only the most basic annexes, and only for short-stays at that. This meant he couldn't go to many places of interest or leisure or entertainment which the siblings could go to as often as they wished. For example, he couldn't go to the cinema, which was actually in Coventry in England, not Iceland. Nor could he go to the Leapin' Leprechaun's, a public house in Dublin. Mike realised that magic life had much the same limitations in Romania as back home.

Juliette, upon seeing that Mike was a little disappointed, had an idea.

"You know, Mike, I've just realised. Our transmutagens give us authority to take others with us, even those who don't have a TMG at all. Maybe Vince and I can take you whenever we're going anywhere interesting. I can't promise it will work, you never quite know what Father has cooked up, but we can try."

"It certainly worked getting here from the dining room, didn't it? Great!" said Mike, who had done his best to hide his disappointment but was truly upbeat again.

Juliette saw Mike's beaming smile.

"Oh, don't get too carried away, Mike, even for us each place we can go to

has magic parameters. Although each annexe varies in what its limits are, just because we can go to Dublin and go shopping along O'Connell Street, or spend a night at the Milan Opera House – doesn't mean we can always go anywhere we would like to."

"Milan isn't in Dublin," came the droll comment from Vincent.

"Shut it, pest! You know what I mean."

"So that would mean if I could transmute to an annexe of the Academy, which just happened to be over the field from Hemlock Hall, I couldn't even nip over and say hello to my friends from school?" asked Mike.

"No – sorry, Mike, you couldn't, it's just not possible, at least, not on the type issued to most people. There are some exceptions, I believe, but I know Hemlock Hall isn't one of them. Even if it was and your friends were in sight, you couldn't just bimble over to them and say hi. I believe some of the latest models have over-rides, allowing anyone using it to do things like that, but they are senior government and military issue only. Father doesn't tell us much about these things really, but he did mention quite recently that the magic that goes into transmuting is now so advanced that those senior enough to warrant it and are willing to accept the residual risk, whatever that means, can now use the latest, most advanced models for instantaneous travel from A to B, with no worries over different dimensions and stuff. But we'll never ever be issued with one of those."

"OK, but still, I think it's still incredible stuff, even the most basic model. Now – what about people? With the basic models I mean. Can people see us? If you waved, would they wave back?"

"You know, Mike, I'm not sure, I don't even know whether any annexe is visible to the locals. The only other thing I do know is, you are able to see whatever is in your ordinary field of vision from within the set parameters. Don't be too disappointed, most annexes have enough of the flavour of the place within its limits to be enjoyable."

Juliette didn't know the exact distances of these parameters, but she knew it wasn't far. Mike mused on this point for a short while, realising that if there was an annexe near to Hemlock Hall, it would be very disheartening not to be able to simply walk off back to school and back into his usual routine. Time passed, and eventually all three ran out of steam and simply rested in their chairs.

Eventually, Juliette rose to go.

"I'll see you at dinner, you two. OK?"

"Bye, Sis, see you later."

Mike also got up to leave.

"Bye, see you at dinner. I'm glad to have met you, both of you," said Mike.

Mike remembered that he hadn't been looking too clean and tidy for a while, and neither had he listened properly to Marina.

"I should have done this hours ago, Vincent, but I'd totally forgotten just how bad a state I'm in. I'll have to get my stuff and go and get a bath or a wash or something, and get changed." Mike lifted his arm and looked at the

TMG on his wrist, as if it was an ordinary wristwatch. "So, how's this work again?"

"I wouldn't use that if I were you," said Vincent mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" said Mike, "I've got to get back to my own room."

"I still wouldn't use it. It won't work."

Mike began to get a little angry, and very worried.

"Look! Just tell me how I get out of here and stop messing about!"

Vincent's face broke out in a huge grin. "Just walk out of the door, take two steps left, and in through the next door."

"And where does that take me to, Hong Kong?!" replied Mike, rather angrily – thinking it was one of Vincent's less amusing practical jokes.

"Nope, your room, you're right next door to me!"

Vincent stopped messing about, for a moment at least, and explained to Mike that to save power, magic power that is, the TMGs did not work when they did not need to be used. So, while going to wherever he was going within the Academy itself and not one of the worldwide annexes, he would have to get around the old fashioned way and walk.

"Er – Vincent, before I go, just remind me, the bathrooms are here, aren't they?"

"Nope."

"Where are they, then?"

"That depends."

"On what?!" said an amused but nevertheless exasperated Mike.

"On whether you mean a real bathroom, or whether you're just being soppy and you need the carzy."

"Er – both."

"Well, the bathroom is in Mauritius, but the toilet is in Finland – Lapland to be precise. Watch you don't get a chill, Mike. Use the bog first then have a bath, the other way round is a killer."

"Er – yeah – I'll try and remember that," said Mike, who thought this was the norm anyway.

A voice suddenly boomed out of nowhere. "Vincent! Don't be crude! And Mike?"

"YES?" shouted back Mike, frantically looking round and who felt as if things were getting more bizarre by the second.

"He's right – bathe afterwards, OK?" shouted the more refined Juliette, two doors away to the right.

"ER – OK!" he shouted back. "How did she hear us?" he asked Vincent.

"The door's open, her door's probably open, and you can hear the slightest whisper right along the passageway."

Upon returning to his room, Mike found he had some new furniture to replace the items bashed up in 'The Battle of Mike's Bedroom', as Vincent would frequently call it from that time on. The trouble was, it was more like new only to Mike. The wardrobe, table and bowl were in a very poor state, but they were usable.

About half an hour later on the paradise Isle of Mauritius, Mike was only too glad to sink deep down into a bathtub of bubbly, lathery, warm water. It didn't need to be too hot, not where he was, but he still needed a rapid injection of degrees Celsius after a non-too pleasant trip to Lapland.

"Mike – are you there, Mike?" It was Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph, the deluxe model of course.

"Er – yes – I'm here. Is that you, Professor? The real you?"

Professor Winch on this occasion could not indulge Mike Miller on the art of long distance deception.

"Mike, I'm afraid there is a problem. Don't worry, you are still safe at Krickenstaltz, for the moment. However, it would appear that Professor Zenith has gummed up the works. He has – er – somehow managed to put a block on most forms of magic travel. My little rescue party got as far as Dover and that was it. As you have probably realised, the risks involved in using any other means to get you home are just far too great. I'm sorry, Michael, it looks like you will have to stay at Krickenstaltz for at least a while longer – until we can work something out."

"You're sorry?! What about me?!"

"You, Mike, are the very person I am sorry for!"

"Sorry, Professor, I didn't mean to sound ungrateful."

"Apology accepted."

"Professor, I've just had an idea. As I'm sure you know, everyone transmutes round here. What if Zenith doesn't know about such things. Couldn't I just transmute back home?"

"You're getting brighter by the hour, Mike, but no. Transmuting is for travelling to and returning from preset destinations. Hemlock Hall or even your own home town, is simply not on the schedule, for want of a better phrase, not yet."

"What if I ask Professor Stannich to transmute me out of here to a place that is on the schedule, even if it's the North Pole?"

"Technically, or (giving a little chuckle), should I say magically, that is indeed possible. I've discussed this with Professor Stannich, but we – ahem – agreed that just because you can doesn't mean you should. You would not be as safe at any of the annexes as you are at the Academy itself. By all means, enjoy yourself, Mike, short-term transmuting should not be much of a safety risk, but long-term is not an option. Now, Mike, I've no further ti—"

"Professor, sorry to interrupt," interjected Mike, as something which had been nagging him at the back of his mind suddenly came to the fore. "But there's something I meant to mention last time. Are my parents OK? Have they been told anything of what's gone on?"

Professor Winch, who was hoping to cover this another time, deliberated for a few seconds, then spoke.

"Well now, your parents. I hope you agree with my thinking on this, Mike, if not, then of course we'll discuss the situation further. Yes, things have gone awry, but despite this, you are as safe as can be where you are right

now, safer even than being at home. Now, each year, when we inform fifth formers' parents and guardians about the Sabbatical, we do stress the rugged perhaps even wild nature of the exercise, and the fact that each fifth former duly selected to take part may well be out of reach, or incommunicado to be pretentious, for days, weeks, or even months on end – this is the nature of the beast. Right here and now, this works in our favour, as your parents already accept that there's a chance you won't be in touch for long periods. Add to this the fact that it's only been just over a day since you left home, and, even though your parents are unaware of any problems, that you are indeed safe. These factors duly combined makes me inclined to adopt, with your blessing, a strategy of letting sleeping dogs lie. I fully expect you to be back at school in a comparatively short time with your parents having continued with their daily lives, blissfully unaware of anything untoward ever having occurred. My main point here is – they've no need to know there ever was a problem. Would you agree with me on this course of action, or more accurately, on my taking no action at all, Mike?" The professor had been about to add – at least for now – but had stopped himself just in time.

Mike knew his thoughts on this immediately.

"If I thought things were going to get really bad, then I think I'd do my best to get a message to them, but seeing as I am likely to be back at school soon, I think it's best if we leave them out of it. But what would I then say about the Sabbatical, Professor? Do I just say I crashed out of it or something?"

"I am glad we're as one on this, Mike, thank you. As for what to say about arriving back at school early, well, you could indeed say you just couldn't ha– er – complete it, but on this occasion, there's no need, it's been cancelled anyway."

Mike smiled. He knew the kindly professor had pulled back from using the phrase – couldn't hack it – but it didn't matter.

"And I really do have to go now, Mike. I am sure Professor Stannich will probably speak to you more on the current situation when you get back from Mauritius. Goodbye for now."

Mike, although relieved that his parents were not to be given anything to worry about, was nevertheless dismayed upon being told of this latest delay in getting home, but he still managed a smile upon realising that Professor Winch seemed to know everything he was doing, even in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

On further reflection, Mike realised that despite chaos seemingly prevailing in England, he did feel safe and sound at the Academy. As well as making two new friends, he was really looking forward to making full use of his transmutagen, short-stay only of course. Things were not so bad after all. (He made a mental note however, that due to the dust and grime of the Academy, he would be requiring three baths a day). He slid down into the warm bubbly water, and just lay there, and lay there, and lay there. . .

"Oy! Kid!" came a shout. "Time's up! Where d'ya fink yer are? Old Mainbrace's gaff?!"

"Sorry, getting out now." But that voice, it was so familiar. "Er – is that you, Barry?"

"Oh blimey, annuver one! Oh yeah, I'm Barry, I do a twelve hour day on me caravan, and then, jus' fer fun – another twelve aht 'ere in the Indian Ocean!"

"Sorry, it's just that you sound just lke Ba—"

"Yeah, yeah, 'eard it all afore," interjected the attendant. "I'm Peter, ya little tyke, Peter Wimpole. Yer won' catch me travellin' rahnd in a box on wheels gettin' dragged by a smelly 'orse! Nah get dried, and git."

Mike, while hurrying to get dried and dressed and away, came to the conclusion that brothers Barry and Peter Wimpole did not get on.

26

More Surprises

MIKE FOUND HIS WAY BACK, first to his room and then on to dinner with his new friends.

"Are you planning on using that TMG thingy tonight, then?" asked a curious Mike.

"Dunno yet, Mike, might do. Why? Do you fancy going somewhere?" replied Vincent.

"Yeah . . . if I can," said Mike, not too sure whether he was being cheeky or not. "Where do you go to most of all, just to relax and things?"

Vincent was about to answer but Juliette beat him to it.

"If you mean just sitting round and reading, talking, playing games and so on, there's the Junior common room, that's still here in the Academy. If you mean where do we go to around the world, then it depends: there's loads of places we can go to but there are many we can't. Ellie and I often go to New York. I think no-brains here prefers the Wild West, but he needs to go with an adult to do that as it's a special time function."

"You're not a mate of Dutch France's, are you?" asked Mike, turning to Vincent.

"Dutch France? Silly name that is. No, never heard of him. Who is he?" replied Vincent.

"Oh, nothing, it's all right. What about holidays?"

Vincent grinned.

"A place called Blackpool in England. Do you know it? Dad chose it because of the sea air, and I forgot to mention this earlier – it's one of the exceptions to the limited parameters rule."

"What, you can go just where you like around Blackpool?"

"Yep! Well, sort of. There are still limits of course but they are far more relaxed than usual. We get to mix with ordinary folk, ride on the trams, go to the funfair and up the tower. Then we stop for a meal, usually—"

"I know," jumped in Mike, "fish and chips, right?"

"Yes, that's right!" said Juliette. "So you do know about Blackpool. Amazing!"

"EVERYONE in Great Britain knows all about Blackpool!" said Mike. "The thing is, though, do you like going there?"

"Er – yes and no," said Juliette.

"Nope, not really. It's too bloo – er – it's freezing, but the Illuminations are great," said Vincent.

"Yep! That sounds about right," said a knowing Mike.

"Not too cold to go 'widing on the wonkeys' though, is it, likkle bruvver."

"Hey, you! I haven't been on a wonk – er – a donkey since I was seven!

Pack it in, will yer, or I'll tell Mike about the time you went to *see 'The Paul Daniels Magic Show'* at the Blackpool Royale. Listen to this, Mike – two minutes into the show and she runs off screaming to Dad who'd gone to the pub next door, and then she shouts all over the place in a high pitched girlie voice, 'PROFESSOR ZENITH IS SAWING A GIRL IN HALF. YOU'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING!'"

"Oh thanks a bundle!" said Juliette. "You told him!"

Now Mike simply could not resist it and he wasn't sure if Vincent would react on cue, but he just had to ask – "What did Paul Daniels think of all this?!"

Quick as a flash, Vincent's reply was, "NOT A LOT!" (Which was one of the late, great, famous magician's catchphrases).

Mike, as well as Vincent, began splitting their sides (and Vincent his pants as well), with laughter. Vincent banged on the table to try and banish the hysterics, but it was to no avail. Mike just couldn't help it; he fell off his chair and continued to emit loud, raucous, side-bursting belly laughs. Juliette, who initially did not find it so funny, eventually succumbed and laughed out loud at their antics. It seemed to take an eternity for all three of them to settle down again, but eventually, with the last sigh so common after prolonged laughter, there was silence, until. . .

"O', Mike, you clumzy boy – not again!"

Mike looked up to see Marina standing there and looking down on him, but she had someone with her, someone familiar.

"Josh!"

"Hello, Mike, still up to your old tricks I see! Here, let me help you up."

Mike rose from the floor assisted by Josh Beecham, nephew of Aunt Hattie of the famed Sweet Emporium. That was not the only person standing next to Marina. Alongside Josh was Professor Ren Stannich.

"I believe zat you two know each uzzer, yez?"

"Yes, that's right, Professor, Josh is a good friend of mine from Hemlock Village."

"Ah, ziss I can tell, much love and affection, yez?"

Now Josh Beecham is not what you would call a new man, of the type shown on adverts for shampoo, and Mike was not the current favourite to win The Mature Teenager Award. The pair blushed, coughed and shuffled their feet upon hearing this.

"Ah, ze famus English reserve. Ze vorld iz falling apart, but you vud rarzer pretend to punch each uzzer in ze shoulders and break vind ven you meet up after much time, insted ov saying 'ow you really feel. Oh vell – it iz one vay, I suppoze," observed Ren Stannich.

"Father!" protested an embarrassed Juliette, but she had no need. The little assembly all chortled upon hearing this, and as the laughs were more on the famed English reserve, both Mike and Josh were only too glad to join in.

The professor spoke up again, mainly to address Mike.

"Vell, on ziss occasion, Mike, I iz zorry to say zat Josh iz not on ze social call. Ve 'ave very urgent bizness to attend to, but I vill let 'im see you later for – 'ow you say – chewing ze crud?"

"Father! It's cud!"

"Actually, it's fat – cows chew the cud. The slang for talking is chewing the fat," said Mike.

More laughs followed, but then Professor Stannich and Josh walked off, with Marina trying to keep up, not only with the pace but with her basking in the shadow of authority.

It had been such an energetic prelude to dinner that this seemed to increase the children's appetite, and they eagerly tucked into roast pork, potatoes and cauliflower.

"So, who's your friend, Mike? Hope you don't mind my saying but he does look a bit strange," said Vincent in a thick voice.

"His name is Josh Beecham and he's a great friend. I know he looks odd, but he's really a nice bloke. I shouldn't really tell you this, but he's been missing for over three years, I didn't think I would ever see him again. I can't wait to find out what he's been up to and where he went."

Straightaway, Mike was sorry he had mentioned all this as it was just the tale of derring-do so eagerly sought by Vincent, but to his credit, Mike stuck to his guns.

"No no no! No more, Vince, I can't tell you, that's it!"

"Well said, Mike! You tell him!" cried Juliette.

"Oh, all right," replied the disappointed Vincent.

They were nearing the end of the meal and Mike wasn't sure how things would work out later.

"Er – what are you two doing after dinner? Going out? Homework?"

"Ellie and I are going to go to Central Park in New York – feed the ducks – have a hotdog and just walk around – our part of it anyway. Fancy coming along?" said Juliette.

"I can't really, it may be my only chance to see Josh. I was hoping we could all go somewhere here, I'd like both of you to get to know him."

"Hey! Me and you can, Mike!" said Vincent, with wolf-whales on his mind. "We can go to the Senior common room, we're allowed to go there if an adult is with us."

"OK, great, but do me a favour and hang on until me and Josh have had a chat on our own, it won't take long. We'll knock for you, because neither of us will know where to go."

"OK, Mike, I can't wait!"

"Vincent!" shouted Juliette.

The children finished their dinner.

Mike and Juliette went back to their rooms, while Vincent had to help in the kitchens as a punishment for insulting the thrice Michelin starred French chef. He had actually called his Beef Bourgignon, Irish stew.

"OK, Juliette, have a nice time. Don't forget to bring back some bagels,"

said Mike, who was joking.

"OK, Mike, I will. Bye," said Juliette, who wasn't.

Time passed by and Mike was getting bored of waiting for Josh to turn up. He decided to go and see if he could find him instead. Maybe Josh did not know where his room was.

His search took him past the office of Professor Ren Stannich. Josh was still with the professor and Mike could hear every word. Marina had not been at her efficient and officious best and had forgotten to close the door.

" . . . Ziss iz very serious, Josh. It appears az if Profezzor Zenith 'az been siztematically sealing off ze country. First, Profezzor Vinch told me Zenith 'az kaputted most magick travel, and now you say zat 'e iz in league viz ze Vorlockz ov Bucharezt?"

While the professor was passing on the news of this latest disturbing development , Mike, due to the very dusty passageway, sneezed very loudly. This not only prevented him from hearing who this new enemy was, but alerted the two in the office to Mike's presence outside. Josh quickly slammed the door shut.

"It's Mike, Professor. I hope he didn't hear us, I don't want to scare him."

"Maybe, maybe not, but don't panic, scared duzn't mean caught, ve can 'andle ze situation. Vot it duz mean iz zat neizer Profezzor Zenith or ze vorlockz 'az any real idea ver ve are. Zey are looking – yez? But zey are not finding. Ze ancient magick iz 'olding out qvite vell, don't you zink?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but the longer the situation stays like this the more risk there is to him. When you mentioned that Mike was here, my first instinct was to get him back to England as soon as possible, but if most magic travel has been scuppered that only leaves travelling by ordinary means, and that would be so dangerous at the moment it's just not an option. Are you certain transmuting won't help?"

"Josh, ve 'ave been zru all ziss, even if I vonted to, it's just not pozzible."

"What if he transmuted to Blackpool? I know he can't leave the area as such, but it is a Parallel Annexe. Maybe he could stay in a guest-house in a side street?"

"No no no! Josh! You iz not zinking straight! Ze TMG senzor vud automatically tranzmute him back 'ere after twenty-four hours! Ziz iz magick zat cannot, repeat, *CANNOT* be altered for anyzing or anyvon. I'm zorry, but zer it iz!"

"What do you mean, twenty-four hours? It's the Holiday Annexe, isn't it?! Send Mike on holiday! A fortnight might just do it, but one lousy day won't!"

"AAAAAARRRGH!" bellowed a frustrated Professor Stannich, and he banged his fists on the table. "Ze allotted 'oliday time for Blackenstaltz iz ze last two veeks in July, ziss iz Zeptember!" (Just like his stubbornness over the dietary preferences of the English, nobody could tell him that it was actually Blackpool). "Even zen, ziss means nozzing. I 'ave banned ze long-term tranzmutations anyvay, you know ziss."

Josh was not cowed by the ranting and raving, but he conceded to the

professor that he was right.

"OK, Professor, he stays, but I stay, too! I'll go to see Vlad the Impala later, I can't talk Impalese anyway. So for now it's Mike and me. OK, best go and leave you to it, bye for now."

"Bye, Josh. Don't come back!"

Josh just smiled. He was well used to the wicked humour of the guardians of Krickenstaltz.

He went out to Mike, who, after realising Josh was with Professor Stannich, had hung around, but he had heard only very similar things to what he already knew, so there was no new panic in his eyes.

"What are you looking in my eyes for?" asked Mike.

"Oh, nothing, nothing. Let's go and say hello to your new friend Vincent," replied Josh.

"OK, but don't mention wolf-whales."

"What?!"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. . . "

They did not go straight to Vincent's room, but to Mike's to catch up on what they had both been doing since they last saw each other. Josh told Mike he had been working undercover all over Europe, trying to get leads on Professor Zenith and to try and find out what his plans were. By coincidence it had brought him here to the Academy.

"So you think there's a spy here, then? I thought that such people couldn't find the place, so Professor Winch said," asked Mike.

"No, Mike, not at all. It might not look it, but this place really is the main centre of power, not the Magic Council in London."

"Yeah, I was thinking that this place was something special, Professor Winch seems to know all about it."

"There is a reason for that. I know that it doesn't seem so, but Professor Winch is the ultimate head of the Academy as well as the WFW. Ren – Professor Stannich, is Second-in-Command and runs the place in Professor Winch's absence. I'm here because I work for the WFW, and so I report in whenever I get the chance."

"That explains a lot," mused Mike, remembering Josh being taken away *to help with their enquiries*; that was the WSS of course, but Mike had learned some time back that these were the WFWs elite troops. "But if Professor Winch is the boss, why isn't he here?"

"Because it's been a tradition for many years that the head of the WFW must also take the headship of Hemlock Hall, which has always had strong links with the WFW. He's still ultimately in charge, of course, but hands the day to day running of things over to his Second-in-Command."

"How do they manage that? Don't they ever disagree over something really important?"

"I shouldn't tell you this, Mike, but all the time. You know Professor Winch was working on sending you to an annexe for a long-term stay?"

"Yes, but he sounded doubtful, said I shouldn't or something. Do you know

why that is?"

"Because Professor Stannich won't allow it; he believes it's too dangerous, at least at the moment."

"Who do you agree with?"

"It's not quite as straight forward as that, Mike. Professor Stannich does have a point. The upshot is, by sending you on an extraordinary long-term transmutation, the finely balanced distribution of magic energy would be disturbed, and this combined with an existing problem with long-term transmuting, would, in Professor Stannich's opinion – be far too risky."

"Or, var tu reezkee."

"Now now!"

"Sorry."

"This is where both of them disagree. Professor Winch believes it can be risked, Professor Stannich thinks it cannot. I'm with Professor Winch on being willing to take risks, but Ren does have the day to day responsibility for the place, and so his decision is final, most of the time."

"Why doesn't Professor Winch just overrule him?"

"Whoa, there, Mr Ruthless! Professor Winch wouldn't do that! That would be of great embarrassment to a great man. Besides, you don't quite understand. Let me explain. Unfortunately, there is an outside chance of disaster. Imagine being stuck in Berlin, or Nairobi, or Cleethorpes? Any problems?"

"Er – no, I don't suppose so. Why do you ask?"

"What about the North Pole? Sent there by accident, all magic sent screwy by the magnetism, and you had no shelter, food, heating, thermal clothing. Problem. . . ?"

"Yes, I see what you mean now, but surely it's just a case of cancelling all transmuting to such places, that way there wouldn't be any danger, would there?"

"Most of the time, no, but there have been cases of temporary blips with long-term transmutations. On occasions people have been sent to somewhere totally different regardless of whether they have been designated magic annexes or not. Professor Stannich is worried that as this is occasionally happening under normal conditions, how worse would, or at least could it get after an unscheduled disturbance?"

"Well, I wasn't banking on it, and Professor Winch did say it was unlikely."

"You don't seem to mind being stuck here, Mike."

"I don't – not at the moment, but it's still only my first day. I have made a couple of new friends, though – Vincent and Juliette – they're the professor's kids. It's just like being back at school."

"I'm glad of that, Mike, it makes it a lot easier for all of us. I do know those two rascals of old, though . . . well, young Vincent more than his sister."

Mike smiled at the thought of Vincent's exploits reaching the eyes and ears of even those who make only the rarest of visits to Krickenstaltz.

"Er – one thing though, Josh. How on Earth did you know Professor Winch

spoke to me earlier?"

"The telemagickeraph deluxe XL model, Mike – now with a three way party line. I didn't speak, because I knew Professor Winch was in a hurry, but enough of telemagickeraphs, TMG's and such-like. What about you? What have you been up to before getting stuck here?"

Mike told him all about the fantastic get-togethers with all of the families of his friends, especially Madeline's folks in Southport and Liverpool. Mike noticed that at one point Josh seemed to raise his eyebrows in surprise, went to say something, thought again, but then said nothing after all. Mike went to ask if anything was wrong, but thought better of it.

He also told Josh of Donaldo's suspicions about his magic status caused by stupendous saves and humungous goal kicks (many of which flew straight past the Brazil goalie and into the net), in the footy matches back home.

Josh fell off Mike's bed, laughing at what Mike had told him.

Apparently, Donaldo had called in the team of roving reporters from the local TV programme, *'Barnswick Tonight!'*, so they could expose to the world the boy that saves penalty kicks fifty feet up in the air and land safely. With a smile and a wink from Debbie Freeman, who had swapped places for the night with Steve Tasker, Mike – although reluctantly – did not save Donaldo's penalties and made a hash of every jump, leap, and attempt to save the ball. Debbie tore a strip off Donaldo for wasting her time and stormed off, but she still managed another smile and a wink towards Mike.

Josh finally recovered, got up and dusted himself down.

"Cor lumme! As Barry Wimpole would say! Come on! Let's go and see your new friend. His father says he's still a bit of a handful."

"Or, a beet ov an 'andvul!" said Mike.

"Now now!" said Josh, again, but now with a chuckle in his voice.

A few minutes later, instead of Vincent leading the way to the Senior common room, Josh held up his TMG, and just said – "SCR."

In an instant all three found themselves sitting on plush leather armchairs in a medium-large sized square room.

To the children the place seemed to be half pub half restaurant, as the room had a strange mix of small round dining tables adorned with dainty tablecloths and doilies, and just as many far plainer square tables. The chairs around each reflected the same division between plain and dainty. However, the establishment was not busy and the only other customers were standing at the bar to the far left of the room.

Josh and the two boys sat facing a roaring log fire. The room was well decorated and well lit, and there were paintings, masterpieces thought Mike, covering every wall. A waiter came to their table and served coffee, and then offered Josh a cigar from a silver box.

"This isn't the Senior common room!" exclaimed Vincent.

"Sorry, Vincent, I'm, let's say, an old boy of the Academy, and I'm not sitting in some raggety old armchair watching you and Mike play darts and drinking coffee even Professor Cornstone would turn his nose up at.

Welcome, lads, to Amsterdam, more precisely, to the Social Club Reubens."

"Who's Professor Cornstone?" enquired a mystified Vincent.

"How did you manage this, Josh? We hadn't even reached the sixth oak door," asked Mike.

"The privilege of rank, old boy!" said Josh, feigning the affected voice of a colonial colonel who still thought Britain had an empire. "I'm entitled to the latest TMG, it's new out."

"Don't tell me – the Super-Deluxe XL Model."

"Don't insult me, Mike, Mark Three, if you please! Right, lads, if you promise not to say a word, especially to Auntie, you can have some lager, you can only have one – and drink it very slowly. OK?"

"Yeah, right on," said Beatnik Vincent.

"Great! Thanks!" said Mike.

Josh ordered the drinks, lit his cigar and settled back into his chair.

"I am led to believe, Vincent, that you like to hear all about wolf-whales? Would you like me to tell you about the time I was in Iceland? You would? Good!

"Right then: I was desperate to escape as I had just killed the leader of the cannibal-elves, BillyBones. As I ran off from his hungry and vengeful comrades, my only escape route was blocked by thirty or more wolf-whales. As their whale bodies cut though the ice with their huge, howling wolf heads clear of the water – they were making blood-curdling howls as they hurtled towards me, I. . . "

Josh went on with his tale of derring-do, with his audience now rapt.

Twenty minutes later. . .

"Cor! Fantastic! You cut off the heads of all the wolf-whales and sent them to their doom in the icy waters. Brilliant!"

"Er – I think you're needed at the bar, Klaus."

"Oh, sorry," said Klaus the barman, "but that was brilliant!"

"Yeah, that was great, Josh! Wait until I tell Sis!" said Vincent.

"Yeah, that was brill!" said Mike, who was actually laughing.

"Don't you believe me, Mike?!" said Josh, making eye gestures to him, hoping that Vincent wouldn't see.

"Er – oh yeah – 'course I do! Fantastic!" doing his best to suppress any further laughs.

"Listen, fellas, it's late, and I bet you're tired, so—"

"No, not at all!" said Vincent, who wanted to hear about the three mile long Python-Mouse, said to keep the entire population of Burnley in fear of their lives.

"Well, I am," said Josh, and in a flash they were all in — a barn dance in the middle of Arkansas.

"Take your partners, one two, three, er! SIX?!"

Billy-Bob Beecham, Zeb Miller and Jimmy-Bob Stannich took their bows, and with the profuse apologies of Josh who had not yet fully mastered the TMG Mark Three, were soon back in the passageway.

"YEEEEE – HAH!" said Vincent.
"Er – yeah – goodnight," said Mike and Josh.
But Mike did not get straight off to sleep. He was remembering the rather rushed trip to Iceland on his very first field trip, in particular – the booms, shouts and yells, the coloured lights, the shadows on the water, and the little dots running over the land, far below from the curious children looking for magmalia plants . . . but by morning he had forgotten all about it.

27

An Illuminating Evening

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.
Mike was finally fast asleep after an unbelievable first day and evening at the Krickenstaltz Academy. Not only had he made two new friends, good friends at that, but Josh Beecham had turned up and had taken him and Vincent out to Amsterdam for an enjoyable and at times hilarious evening.
"Mike, sorry old mate, wake up. Mike, wake up." It was Josh. He shook Mike a couple of times until he awoke.
"Whaa? Wh-who is it?" said Mike, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.
"Sorry, Mike, there have been new developments. I've got to go, right now."
"Wh-what's it about, then?"
"It's too complicated to explain it all, but I'll try and fire off a letter in a few days, but I've got to go right now. It was great seeing you, Mike. And don't worry, everything will be OK, honest. Gotta go, bye for now."
"Bye, Josh, see you soon."
Mike watched Josh leave, and then he heard him in the passageway – "Aberystwyth!"
Mike knew he had used his TMG, and he also knew that the Welsh university town had something to do with current events, but all this musing could wait until morning – or so he thought.
"Mike," came a whisper. "Mike!" came a bellow. "Oh,sorry." It was Vincent. "I heard voices. Everything all right?"
"Yeah, yeah, but Josh has had to go, he was just saying goodbye."
"Where's he gone?"
"I've really no idea," said a tired Mike.
There was a knock on the door.
"Are you decent? Can I come in?" It was Juliette.
"Yeah, why not," said Mike, resigned to keeping owl hours.
"Sorry, but I heard voices. Everything OK?"
"Josh has gone, Sis, probably to take on the ghost of Billy Bones," said Vincent.
"What?! Who?! What are you talking about?!" replied Juliette.
Mike, with Vincent chomping at the bit to embellish everything, just about managed to explain the evening's events.
Mike did not intend to mention the lager but forgot.
"Oh Mike! If Dad finds out you two really will be for it. You'd best tell your friend you've had your last booze for a long while. OK?"
"OK," said Mike, in a yawny voice, hoping his sleepy slur would be enough

of a hint.

"Are you hungry, Mike?" asked Juliette.

"Er – no, not really. Why?" replied a mystified Mike.

"Oh, it's just that I've got a bag of bagels in my room. You said you loved 'em. Still, tomorrow, eh?"

The still tired but magnanimous Mike, so often seen with an exasperating Dutch at 3:00 a.m. at Hemlock Hall, came to the fore.

"Ah, blow it, fetch the bagels, and I've brought back some Dutch l-l-l (Mike deliberately stalled over the l) lemonade!"

There was another knock on the door.

"And I've got some pizza, made five minutes ago in Rome!"

It was Ellen, with her boyfriend, Gregor. At this, Vincent was disappointed as the last person he wanted in on a moon-light tucker party was Ellie the Snitch.

"I thought you lot would still be up," said Ellen.

"And so did I – er – we!"

This time it was Ernst Stannich, followed by Marina, Laszlo – and a young lad called Bertie, who worked in the stables.

"Put the jukebox on, Bertie." said Juliette.

"What?!" said Mike.

"Just watch. It's great," chuckled Juliette.

Bertie stood right in front of Mike and opened his mouth. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something.

"Feed him, Mike, anything," whispered Juliette.

Mike took a piece of bagel and put it in Bertie's mouth, he swallowed it in one gulp. Mike was astonished to see Bertie burst into life and start to sing, but it was not his own voice – it was Elvis Presley's! 'Well, since my baby left me! I have a new tale to tell!' blared Bertie. Although Mike thought that nothing could shock him anymore, he was well and truly staggered by this. It wasn't an impersonation, it was the original Elvis record blaring out from Bertie. This was quickly followed by the latest chart toppers such as McFly singing what else but Transylvania, and even Elvis again, then a few more oldies, and then McFly – again! Rather surprisingly it was the dark horse Marina who was the life and soul of the party, prancing and dancing around Mike's room, and doing all the actions to a host of well-known party songs.

After a couple of hours, the music – or rather Bertie – had stopped, the food had all been eaten, and the group of revellers made their way back to their own rooms.

"Thanks, Mike, great party!" said Gregor.

"Zat voz gud! Now make sure ze room iz tidy!" said Krickenstaltz's resident chameleon, Marina.

"Bye, Mike!" "Bye, m'lad!" "Tata!"

As expected, Vincent and Juliette were last to leave.

"Er – Juliette, this doesn't happen every night, does it?" asked a happy, contented, but a very, very tired Mike, who realised that once your second

wind had come and gone, there wasn't a third wind waiting in the wings.

"No, of course not. Just every now and again, especially when people have been out for the night to different places worldwide. They like to bring back a bit of the atmosphere. Goodnight, Mike, don't miss breakfast," said Juliette.

Vincent followed.

"See you in the morning, Mike."

"You'd best see me now, then!"

"Oh yeah! I mean see you at brekky."

Mike climbed back into his pizza, bagel and sweet covered bed and thought, "I hope that no-one's been to New Orleans or Rio." He closed his eyes . . . opened them again . . . and got up. As much as a nice bubbly bath in Mauritius tempted him, he was too tired. He did the best he could with the bowl of cold water, got dressed and went to breakfast. The irony that breakfast in Australia was even further away did not escape him, and he chuckled to himself as he sat down.

"Morning," said Mike to the siblings.

"Yeah, morning, Mike. Listen, no more of them late do's, mate, I'm really done in," said Vincent.

"What?! Me?! It was you who . . . never mind. I've got some news for you both, I forgot to tell you last night. There are problems getting home so I'm here for a week, maybe longer."

"Oh, Mike," said Juliette, "what's happened?"

"It's a long story, but there are problems with magic travel and transmuting is out."

"What!" shouted both Juliette and Vincent together.

"No, no, not for you, for me. There's no way I can use transmuting as a stepping-stone for getting home."

"We already knew that. We went through it all before, remember? You could have an annexe right next door to your own house, but that doesn't mean you can hop over the fence and get back home."

It was a complicated situation. Mike knew that he had not been told all the facts, but he wasn't sure if Vincent and Juliette knew quite as much as he did. He decided it was best not to try and find this out, in case of unintentionally telling them something that they did not currently know, due to their father certainly not wanting them to know.

Mike changed the subject.

"You know," said Mike, "something has been puzzling me about you two, a couple of things, actually."

"What do you mean, Mike?" replied Juliette.

"How come both of you are so English in your ways? And why don't you go to school?"

"We are English! Or at least half English. Didn't I tell you? My mu-mu-mum! There! No tears this time. My . . . our mum – was English. She studied at Krickenstaltz when it was still a university, met Father, and that was it. She stayed out here, Mum and Dad married, and we were born! Even after

she died, a friend of Mum's from England came over to look after us. You're wrong about school, though. This might surprise you but we go to school in Wales – normally."

"What do you mean, normally?"

"It's being decorated at the moment, and so we've been allowed extra time off so they can finish it in peace."

"Whereabouts in Wales? I might know the area. I've been on a few days out there with my mum and dad."

"It's a small high school, an annexe, right nex tto the University of Abracadrystwyth. I love it but Vince absolutely hates it."

"Really?" chuckled Mike, who was not at all surprised.

Also, Mike was not at all surprised to find that the place was closed. He couldn't say why and the story about it being spruced up for the new school year might just be the truth, but he doubted it.

"Are you the only kids in Krickenstaltz, then?"

"Yep. 'Fraid so," said Vincent. "There used to be loads, but their parents were mainly tutors from the university. Since that went there wasn't any more work, so whole families moved out virtually overnight."

"Why did it close?" asked Mike.

"A massive diversion of magic energy was needed to open up more and more annexes. The Academy itself could no longer sustain such a big concern as a university, so it had to go," said Juliette.

"Pity," said Mike, who if truth be told was in small talk mode, and wasn't in the least bit concerned about the demise of a great place of learning, magic or not.

The three still tired youngsters ate their boiled eggs and toast, and drank their tea in relative peace and quiet.

"Er – Mike, I hope you don't mind, but Vince and I have to make our monthly trip to our Aunt Schnirkinsolzja in Sofia. I'd take you with us, but she doesn't like strangers," said Juliette, a little awkwardly.

"Your Aunt who?!" said a chuckling Mike, again thinking it was a wind up. He took one look at Juliette's face. "Oh, sorry, you're serious."

But Juliette's stern face gave way to a smile.

"I know, Mike, I know. Such a ridiculous sounding name. That's why her nickname is just – Solzy – but not to her face."

Mike went to say "that figures" but quite wisely did not.

"And don't call her that in front of Ellie the Snitch, either, she'd be straight off to Father. Make her day, that would," sneered Vincent.

"Stop blaming Ellie for everything!" demanded Juliette.

"Why should I? I've had more tellings off, more thick ears, more groundings because of her than I would have done otherwise. I even had to miss Blackpool, two years in a row."

"I thought you didn't really like it there," said Mike.

"I don't, but it's the Principal," replied Vincent.

"What? The moral position?"

"No, Principal Jones from our school. Ellie snitched to him, he told Dad, who stopped my holiday – twice!"

Before Vincent could eulogise any further he was stopped in his tracks by Juliette.

"As I was saying Mike, I'm sorry you can't come today but we will be back for lunch, Auntie can only tolerate us for a couple of hours. Come on, Vince. See you later, Mike. Bye."

Mike watched the bickering siblings bicker most probably all the way to Bulgaria and back. Not long after, he was feeling quite bored, but then he had an idea. 'If Josh can write to me, then maybe I can write to him at the University of Abracadrystwyth' thought Mike. Two hours later. . .

'. . .. And don't worry about me, I'll be OK.
And don't forget, keep fighting those
wolf-whales! Oh, and PS. Bvreak vind for me!

Regards – Mike.'

The only thing was to wait for Vincent and Juliette to return so he could find out where the post box was. Both returned soon after, and although Mike thought it was to do with a ray of sunlight shining on his face, Vincent's eyes sparkled mischievously upon being asked how to post a letter.

"Oh – er – I'm sorry, Mike, but we don't have a postal service here. I thought you'd know that, but I do know a way to send a letter."

"How?" asked Mike.

"Pigeon post!"

"What!" exclaimed Mike, who thought pigeon post had gone out with the First World War.

"Yeah – honest! Pigeon post! But not from here though, it'll have to be Blackpool."

"Blackpool?! Why Blackpool? And wouldn't there be a proper post box there?"

"Er – no," replied Vincent, "not in our part."

"But how do we get there?" asked Mike.

"Easy, on our TMGs. Remember Juliette saying you could go with us to places? Here's one place we can go."

"When?" asked Mike.

"Tonight! The Illuminations have just started, and we'll send a pigeon from the tower, OK?" said Vincent, gambling on the fact that Mike would not question him further on Blackpool's postal facilities, whether for the magic community or otherwise.

"Yeah, why not?!" replied a very enthusiastic Mike, his mind now cleverly distracted from mundane matters such as post boxes, of which there are plenty to choose from in both the magic and non-magic sectors of Blackpool.

An uneventful lunch ensued and a yawning Mike tramped heavily back to

his room and fell asleep. Burning the candle at both ends did not suit Mike and he slept solidly for five hours.

Upon waking, he decided to take a quick trip to the boys' room and then on to the sub-tropics. He even momentarily considered weeing in the Indian Ocean to avoid the icy cold toilets of Lapland, but his sense of decency prevailed and he duly suffered, but the compensation was worth it.

After braving the frozen north, he again walked through the sixth oak door, and the heat hit him from the blazing sun in the crystal clear blue sky. He walked over the warm, golden sands to the bamboo huts which covered the sunken baths, and paid Peter 'The Grudge' Wimpole his one jupiter piece.

"Fanks. 'N' no actin' the yak this time, yung'un, takin' 'ours an' 'ours jus' to gerron me nerves. Try it again and y'll feel me hands dahn yer froat!" growled the grudge.

Mike pondered on whether yak was right for these parts, or was the less amenable of the Wimpole brothers also not too bright? Moreover, he didn't think that any such threat really existed. He could recall the suspicious Donaldo vowing that he would put his fist down his throat, and he remembered hearing Donaldo's mother saying he'd get the back of her hand across his face after her son had become a laughing stock all around the neighbourhood; this was after Donaldo had made ridiculous claims of flying boys to the local media. But Mike couldn't recall anyone ever saying to some troublesome child that they would feel their hands down their throat. No matter.

He once again forgot all his woes and just allowed his head to stay above the lovely, cool, bubbly water. Paradise. Eventually and very reluctantly, he got out and got dried and dressed. He went back to his room to see if he had any clean clothes left to change into: not only had all his clothes been washed, cleaned and ironed, but a modern travel bag was lying next to his own, full of new clothing. There was a note attached: 'You'll need these. Cheers. Josh.'

"Brill! Ta, Josh," Mike said out loud to no-one, and wondering how it had got to Krickenstaltz.

At dinner, Juliette was just as excited as Vincent. "Great idea, Mike! You don't mind my coming, do you?"

"No, not at all," said a suspicious Mike.

"One thing though, Mike, we can't go straight from here, you'll need to go back and fetch an outdoor coat," said Vincent.

"It is Blackpool, isn't it? We'd better not be going to the North Pole."

"Don't be daft, Mike, but Blackpool is cold, you said so yourself."

"That's true. Silly me," said Mike who was still not sure of what was going to happen and wondered whether Josh was in on it, because luckily for Mike he had included a big, thick, heavy coat in the new clothes he'd bought him.

An excellent dinner of steak, chips and peas followed by sticky toffee pudding and custard was rather wasted. Juliette and Vincent rushed through theirs, leaving at least half of it uneaten.

"Come on, Mike! Let's get to it!"

"Er – hang on a mo. I'm just finishing my pudding."

"Aaargh, eating's for wimps. Come on!" said Juliette.

"Oh all right!"

Ten minutes later, all three were assembled at the sixth oak door, ready to use Juliette's TMG.

"Blackpool!" exclaimed Juliette. In an instant they were outside on the observation walkway that goes around the top of Blackpool Tower.

It was night-time and cold, but very, very bright.

The illuminations had been turned on the night before and the whole place was lit up for miles around. This was just as much to do with a giant laser as the illuminations themselves. This flashed a sparkling green ray of light over the Irish Sea, then shone inwards towards the heart of Lancashire, and then up the coast towards Fleetwood and Morecambe, and southwards down along the coast as far as Crosby.

The illuminations themselves were stretched along the promenade. Every childhood hero, every nursery rhyme and cartoon character, Father Christmas and his entourage – as well as Harry Kane the famous England footballer – were all depicted in an array of coloured lights twenty feet high.

The sweet and savoury smell of fish and chips, doughnuts and freshly rolled Blackpool Rock permeated the air. There were sounds of screams from the funfair as the log flume frightened the life out of the parents, while their embarrassed children queued to go on the Hyper-Death Disintegrater.

The world-famous Blackpool trams were illuminated and brightly painted, some were even rocket shaped. With their distinctive rolling and clanking sound and intermittent shunting noises and bell ringing, they trundled along the tracks in the middle of the promenade.

The throngs of people below dodged and weaved their way along. They were trying to get in and out of the amusement arcades, pubs and clubs, theatres, night markets, fish and chip restaurants, or maybe just to catch the last rides of the funfair.

The three watched all this from the tower. They were so captivated by the scenes below, they forgot for a moment why they, or at least Mike, were there at all.

"Do you think I can send my letter now?" finally asked Mike.

"Nah, not yet, Mike, let's go inside the café and have something to eat and drink," suggested Vincent.

Mike whispered to Juliette, "Is this a magic place, or what?"

She giggled and replied, "It's both, Mike! Ordinary and magic!"

"Both! How can it be both?!"

"Oh, I thought you knew. It's a Dual Annexe within a Parallel Annexe. What non-magic folk have, we have, in exactly the same time and space. So, yes, it's magic to us, paying in jupiters and all that, but the really cool thing is you could be standing or sitting in exactly the same place as anyone from the non-magic world."

"Wow!" said the truly astounded Mike.

"Who's for fish and chips? I'm paying!" proclaimed Juliette.

"Yep! I'm eating!" said a still hungry Mike and a much relieved penniless Vincent at the same time. They walked through the double doors into the Top-Deck Restaurant.

The French proprietor twiddled the elongated ends of his black moustache, and harumphed rather loudly after hearing Vincent call his fine establishment a 'caf''.

Mike was very impressed by the meal. He had had fish and chips in Blackpool a few times, but he'd never really enjoyed them. This time it was different. The meal tasted wonderful and the serving was generous. He swallowed the last morsel of cod and then finished the last of his lemonade.

"Can I send my letter now?"

"Yeah, why not?" replied Vincent. "Come on, then."

While Juliette just sat there with a strange grin on her face, Vincent took Mike over to see Jean Michelle, who was by the till counting his night's takings so far.

"Excuse me, but we'd like to send something by pigeon post, please!" said a strangely jaunty Vincent.

Jean Michelle smiled, ducked down, and came up with a box in his hand.

"'Ere you are – gently tie 'er to ze post until ze letter has been attached. Zen let 'er go. Be careful wiz 'er now."

Vincent took the box and gently lifted out the pigeon, which just quietly stood on his hand while she was tied to the special post by the door. Mike gently slipped the letter into a plastic pouch wrapped around her middle, Vincent undid the string, and off she flew, out through the double doors and away.

Mike looked up as the pigeon flew around the tower and out of sight. What Mike did not see was Juliette and Vincent sniggering.

"She's gone. I wonder how long it will take for her to get to Josh?"

"Hmmmm – don't know," said Juliette.

"Hmmmm – difficult to say," said Vincent.

"What do we do now? Funfair? Arcades? What do you reckon?" asked Mike, raring to go.

"A little later, Mike, I'm still thirsty. You look thirsty, too. Another lemo?" asked Vincent.

"And I'll have one, too!" said Juliette.

"Er – OK," said Mike.

"Get your wallet out, then," said the penniless Vincent.

A few minutes later there was a whooshing sound as a bird flew past the open double doors.

"I could have sworn that was the same pigeon," said Mike.

"Doubt it," said Vincent.

"There's more than one pigeon post point in Blackpool, yours will be well on her way by now," said Juliette.

"Yes – well on her way – definitely," said Vincent.

"Yeah, you're probably right. So – can we go now or are you two still thirsty?"

"Hungry again, actually, Mike. Beefburger?" replied Vincent.

"I'll have one," piped up Juliette.

"Why not?" chuckled Mike, who wondered if their father liked Blackpool because it improved their appetite. Again, in the middle of their second supper and third meal in an hour, a bird flew past the doors.

"There's something wrong here, I'm almost certain that's the same bird," observed Mike.

"Shouldn't think so. Probably just a bat, loads of them up here," said Vincent.

"Yes, a bat. Your pigeon is probably flying over Lytham about now," said Juliette.

"Yes — Lytham — definitely," said staccato Vincent.

"I'm going to check – are you coming?" asked a worried and a somewhat annoyed Mike.

"No. We'll hang on here, you go ahead, put your mind at rest. You'll soon realise it was a bat," replied Vincent.

Mike stomped off out of the doors and turned right.

The observation walkway was actually square rather than round. Mike walked up to the first corner and turned.

After a couple of feet he realised he was right back outside the double doors.

"Hi, Mike! That was quick! Anything?" shouted Juliette as she smiled and waved to Mike from inside the Top-Deck.

"No, I must have lost my concentration there, I'll try again," replied a confused Mike. Just as he said this a bird whooshed past him at speed. Again, he thought it was the same pigeon who had taken his letter. Off he walked again, turned the corner and there he was again, right outside the doors.

The siblings, as well as Jean Michelle, simply waved and smiled. And again – whoosh! But still too fast for Mike to be sure.

"Oh I get it! Altitude Disorientation Syndrome." (This was something Mike had read about in one of Abigail's books). "Maybe it's a common thing. Concentrate, Mike," he said to himself.

Off he went again. The same thing happened. And again. Then again – and then again! Each time his so called friends plus Jean Michelle, and now seven other amused diners, were standing in a group just smiling and waving as he took just one turn to get back to the beginning instead of four. And on each occasion the mysterious pigeon whooshed past him.

"Hi there, Mike!" shouted the amused observers.

Whoosh! This time, Mike got a good look at the clear plastic pouch. 'To: Josh. . . ' It was the same bird after all. "Hey! Whoa there, girl!" but she was out of sight.

Mike was very, very confused. Was he taking a very deviously hidden shortcut? Was he deluded? Was it really the same corner? He had to find out. He had an idea.

He went back in – said nothing to his two highly suspicious looking but nevertheless still highly amused friends – and borrowed a marker pen off Jean Michelle.

Mike decided to mark each point on his walk around the tower, and not just the four corners but also the starting point which was the restaurant doors. All being well he would be able to number his short walk from 1 to 5, before being back at the doors. Mike was about to write on the glass door but caught sight of Jean Michelle looking right at him, so he decided to write on the metal walkway instead. With Jean Michelle still looking on, without even blinking, Mike decided he would simply note in his mind that the doors were the first stage of the five point trip.

He reached the first corner and marked the safety grill which strengthened the railings around the perimeter with a large '*2*'. He walked on up to the next turning, had the pen ready to add the legend '*3*' to the safety grill on that corner, but saw the figure 2 which only seconds earlier he had added to the grill on the first corner. Things suddenly became a lot clearer.

"Magic! And they haven't told me!" Mike said to himself, just as the post pigeon flew past him yet again. He whistled and shouted, "Hey! Come back! Come on, girl." At the same time as this he thought he heard a whistle from inside the restaurant, but before he could turn to see who it was, the pigeon landed on his outstretched arm.

Mike walked back in and challenged the two conspirators and a grinning Jean Michelle, who duly retrieved his post pigeon.

"You two! You – you – you—" snarled a wild-eyed Mike.

"Now now, Mike – no swearing!" said Juliette, in between very loud laughs.

Vincent couldn't even manage a single word, just laughter.

"What was all that about?! Why couldn't the pigeon leave and why couldn't I get right around?!"

"I dunno, Mike, but it's great, isn't it?!" chortled Vincent.

"I know, Mike, even if thicko doesn't. You've just experienced the magic world's very own Bermuda Triangle – the Blackpool Right-Angle!" said Juliette.

"The what?!" spluttered Mike.

"The Blackpool Right-Angle! Calm down, Mike, it was just a joke. What it is, it's a clash between the magic energy from here, and ordinary energy. It's relatively new, about fifteen years or so. Father reckons it's only occurred since they put oil and gas rigs in the Irish Sea. Both energies sort of clashed, something had to give – and so that's why you can't go the whole way round the observation walkway – or rather you can, but in a funny way."

"What about the poor bird? You could have killed her making her fly like that."

"We thought about that, but Jean Michelle assured us that as she is a real

post pigeon, she was in absolutely no danger. Honest, we wouldn't have done it otherwise."

Mike's face was still like thunder and the siblings were at least a little worried.

"Oh, come on, Mike, be a sport. It was only a joke," pleaded a very worried Juliette.

Mike looked at Jean Michelle who simply stood there smiling, and then at the pigeon cooing on his arm as if to say, 'Thanks for the run-out, and can we do it again tomorrow?'

Mike's face broke out into a huge, great big grin and once again burst into uncontrollable laughter. He collapsed onto a chair – which unfortunately broke – and he ended up on the floor.

"O', Mike, you need 'elp!" said Marina, who had just arrived to see the Illuminations.

The rest of the evening was spent in the arcades and eating ice cream, which didn't melt out in the open but rather became more solid.

Mike liked this part of his surprising evening most of all, as the barriers between ordinary and magic folk did not apply to the promenade and funfair areas.

Mike also finally got to post his letter – from a perfectly ordinary post box. Unbeknown to the youngsters, fifty members of the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment had been hastily despatched to Blackpool to keep an eye on the youngsters. This was without their horses.

On a previous occasion when the troop had been sent to guard a much younger Ellen, Vincent and Juliette, Mrs Blanche Marcheson, an eighty-two year old retired seamstress from Hetton-le-Hole, had climbed up onto Zavarro – a proud and brave warrior horse – and demanded that she be taken for a ride along the beach. Much to the horse's disgust, his rider, Corporal Kyle Molencovic – after receiving eighteen very hard clouts from Blanche's brolly, made Zavarro trot dutifully up and down Blackpool beach to great jeers and cheers from his amused comrades.

Mike and co. had their fill of food and laughter, after which they knew it was time to go.

They arrived back safe and sound around midnight. Mike was already yawning and went straight off to bed. About an hour later. . .

"Mike, are you awake? Mike?"

"SNNNZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!"

"Sorry, folks," said Vincent, "he's fast asleep."

Forward thinking Mike smiled, turned over – and then he really did go straight to sleep.

28

A Test of Friendship

COURTESY of his brand new ever-improving telemagickeraph, Professor Winch contacted Mike to give him the news that he would certainly be stuck at Krickenstaltz longer than a week, and in Professor Winch's opinion for as long as a month. This was due to a combination of Professor Zenith's trickery, and a comprehensive and prolonged transport strike all over Europe.

"...And so, Mike, on the one hand I'm relieved that this further prolonging of our coming to get you is not connected to evil, but on the other, I am nevertheless frustrated and disappointed with our non-magic friends that they cannot find a way of solving their travel disputes. The strike is Europe wide. As well as all shipping stuck in port, all planes are grounded, and there are no other commercial forms of transport currently in operation. All are off the road indefinitely."

"Can't they go over fields, then?"

"Shut up, Mike. Further to this, even the more agrarian amongst them have withdrawn their horse and carriage services. I'm even considering swimming the Channel and then riding a tandem to come out and get you."

"But that will take you weeks!"

"I'm joking, Mike."

"Oh," said Mike, and then mouthed to himself, 'Shut up, Gabriel!'

"I heard that!"

"How? Oh, the Deluxe Model. . ."

"Actually, It's the Mark–"

"Three!" jumped in Mike.

"Four!" said the insulted Professor Winch.

Mike chuckled to himself at the seemingly ever-improving functionality of magic gizmos for both communication and travel, but this minor musing was banished from his mind as he finally remembered to ask about something which had been niggling him for some time.

He wanted to know if Professor Zenith had also managed to interfere with the magic that enabled broomsticks to fly, but yet again, what he thought could only be static interference meant that he received no answer or explanation whatsoever.

Mike shrugged his shoulders, and he and Professor Winch said their goodbyes.

Later at breakfast, Mike was musing on this latest news, but also on other things, too, which he thought were even more important, seeing as his stay was going to be longer than first thought.

He came to the conclusion that maybe it was unfair to expect to be able to hang around with Vincent and Juliette all the time. He wasn't at all sure what the pair of them would do without him, but, although he didn't mean this in an arrogant way – he somehow thought that his presence was as much a novelty for them as it was for him to be at Krickenstaltz.

He assumed, maybe rightly, that he had taken them away from doing whatever they would normally be doing.

He also assumed that maybe it was time to back off and to give the pair some breathing space. He realised that Juliette may well be glad of this, as she already had a good friend in Ellen. He wasn't too sure of what Vincent's usual routine was, but Mike had it set in his mind that it was probably for the best that he return to it.

That left him with one problem. His only release from a daily round consisting of meals, a bath, his room and back to bed – would be transmuting, but his own TMG was next to useless. It was the most basic model and did not give him access to anywhere he would choose to go, given the chance. However, he had an idea which he would set in motion after breakfast.

"You're quiet this morning, Mike. Anything wrong?" asked Juliette.

"Um? No, no . . . not wrong exactly, but I've just had another chat with Professor Winch. He told me that magic is still blocked and that there's now a transport strike. It looks like I'm here for the duration." (Mike liked this phrase, picked up from his father. He hadn't a clue as to its origins or whether it was relevant at that moment, but it sounded good).

"That's great! said Juliette.

"Brill!" said Vincent.

Unfortunately, through musing over things for far too long, Mike had come up with the notion, a faint possibility, that maybe Vincent and Juliette had been given strict orders, perhaps reluctantly obeyed – to be Mike's friend.

A doleful and even mildly paranoid Mike translated these reactions into what he considered to be the truth:

'Oh no!' said Juliette. 'More looking after this freak instead of Central Park with Ellen!'

And then. . . *'I thought Ellie the Snitch was bad enough, but now I'm stuck with Mike Miller!'*

Mike convinced himself that these were their real feelings.

"Don't worry. I won't be here that long," said a sullen Mike, as he left his breakfast uneaten and skulked off back to his room.

"What's up with Mike?!" said Juliette, suspiciously to her brother.

"Don't look at me! I ain't done anything! Maybe he's fed up here and wants to go."

"Because you made him fed up! What have you done to him? What did you do, Vincent?! I'll tell Father!"

"I tell you, I have not done or said anything to Mike! Not a sausage!" Juliette could tell when Vincent was lying and when he wasn't.

"Is it something I've said or done, then?"

"Doubt it," replied Vincent.

"Oh Vince, I'm worried, I may have to see Dad."

"I may as well see him for you then, I'm due to see him after breakfast. He asked me to do some weeding, and – er – I dug up thirteen of his prize hydrangeas."

"How many prize hydrangeas did he have altogether?"

"Thirteen."

"Oh," said Juliette.

From a negative came a positive. Mike's totally unfounded views on Juliette and Vincent made him psych' himself up for what was to come, which was most likely to be intense boredom, so Mike's mind was telling him, but he would not give up without a fight. His next stop was the office of Professor Ren Stannich. He knocked on the door.

"Come in, Mike."

The fact that the professor knew who it was caught Mike on the hop.

"Er – hello, Professor, sorry to disturb you, but I was vunderi – er – wondering if I could have a few words vith – er – with you."

The professor's eyebrows were raised, but as stern as he could be he also knew the effect an attack of nerves could have, even if this meant his own accent being mimicked.

"Zertinly, Mike, do sit down, make yourself – er – er. . . "

"Cumftyvul – oh, I'm sorry, comfortable?" suggested an even more nervous and embarrassed Mike.

The professor gave a suspicious look as Mike sat down, but it was soon banished from his countenance.

"Vot can ve do for you, Mike?"

"Er – well, sir, I'm going to be here longer than everyone thought. Did you know that, by the way?"

The professor just smiled and nodded.

"I was wondering if – er – if I could have a more powerful – erm – TMG."

Mike was sweating and he had to mop his brow with his sleeve.

"Votever for, Michael? I know zat yours iz ze most bazick model, but you can alvayz go viz my children on days or ze nights out. Vy on erz vud you need anuzzer one ven you can do ziss?"

"Vell – er – well, Professor, you must remember that Vincent and Juliette will be back at school soon, and I wouldn't want to be in anyone's way in the daytime. Also, I – er – er – I have asthma and I could do with a few nights getting fresh air in–in – er – the Swiss Alps! I don't think that they would like it there, they – er – don't like the cold – but I do!"

The professor had both an understanding yet worried look on his face.

"Michael, ziss iz big problem for me. Ze children, or even Profezzor Vinch 'az probably already mentioned ze urgent need to save energy. In our vorld, Magick-Energy iz just az preshus az ze ordinary energy. Ve may vell create ziss out ov nozzing, but zat duz not mean ve can produce endless supplies.

You understand, Mike? If you are ill, zen I can ov courze send my bruzzer, 'e iz excellent doctor." Professor Stannich looked down at his desk and shuffled a few pieces of paper around. "Ver iz zat – er – er – desk?"

Mike could tell that his little chat was over.

"I think I understand, Professor, thanks for seeing me. I'd better go now, bye."

"Bye, Mike – anytime? Yez?"

"No," whispered Mike, back outside in the passageway.

"I heard that!"

"Oh I'm so stupid!" muttered Mike to himself, even more quietly.

"No, I heard it." It was Ernst Stannich.

"That was quick!" said Mike, thinking the professor had already sent for his brother to see to a supposedly ill Mike. But this was not the case. Ernst had been sorting out files in the Academy's registry; this was in a room which had previously been an ante-room adjoining Professor Stannich's office. Ernst, without wanting to or being able to prevent it, had heard every word of Mike's and the professor's conversation through the very thin wooden partition.

Ernst did not explain further. To do so would have made it seem as if he had been eavesdropping, which most certainly had not been the case.

"Come with me, Mike, this way."

"Er – OK, but where are we going?"

"Nowhere special. This way."

Ernst took Mike to the next passageway, one which had the luxury of a woodworm rotted bench to sit on.

"No, this is no good. On second thoughts. . ."

Ernst lifted up his TMG, one of the real humdingers issued to the top brass, and said, 'Blackpool!"

Mike was very soon back in the Top-Deck Restaurant and was having coffee and hot-dogs with Ernst.

"Right, Mike, what's up? And no rubbish. Understand?"

"Er–OK." Although Mike said this in a resigned fashion, he had no intention of telling the absolute truth, but he decided to open up a little, but not much. " . . . So if they do go back to school soon, and I'm still stuck here, I won't know what to do."

Ernst thought, and nodded his head. "OK, Mike, I'll ask him. I'll even put in as strong a case for you as I can, but if he says no, it's no – OK?"

"OK, thanks," said Mike.

"Come on, Mike, let's go."

Ernst smiled, turned away, said something while holding his wrist up, and next thing is they were on the final approach to the top of a mountain, near Gstaad in the Swiss Alps. Ernst hung on to the mountain and had Mike harnessed to him. He was perfectly safe but Mike didn't know that. The wind was gale force, howling across the mountain and the snow was falling heavily; it was blizzard conditions.

Ernst shouted down to Mike, who could just barely make out, "HOW IS YOUR ASTHMA NOW?!" To which Ernst could barely make out the reply, "IT'S BETTER NOW, THANKS! IN FACT – I THINK I'M PERMANENTLY CURED!"

*

" . . . Here, put this on, it will help you blend in."

Ernst passed Mike an Hawaiian shirt, although they were now in Jamaica, warming up again after their expedition. They were seated at a beach bar, drinking cocktails, although Mike's was non-alcoholic. Next thing is, he heard 'CAMERAS ROLL!', and the famous film star, Sean Connery, but the very young version, walked along a jetty and up to a man painting a boat, and started discussing if his name was Quarrel or not.

"I've seen this! This is Dr. No. Brilliant! James Bond! Absolutely brilliant!"

"CUT! CUT! CUT!" came a voice booming through a megaphone. "Hey, fella? Yeah, you with the stoopid wizard's hat on! Control your son, will yer! If it happens again, you're outa here! Get me?!"

Ernst quickly took off his hat which he'd forgotten about, and leaned over and whispered to Mike, "Sorry, my fault. I forgot to tell you. This isn't like the film, Harvey or, It's a Wonderful Life, everybody can see and hear us. It's one of the more relaxed Parallel Annexes."

"But it's 1962 and we're on the set of the first James Bond Film! How did you manage that?!"

"There's a new TMG out – it's the—"

"I know, Mark Four."

"And the rest, Mike! It's the Mark Four Series Two, which comes with a Time Matriculator!"

They watched as the scene developed. There was a fight in the back of the bar, then the CIA agent Felix Leiter turned up to intervene and to explain to Bond that the chap he was fighting with was actually the local help. All too soon it was time for Mike and Ernst to go. They finished their drinks and were very soon back in the passageway.

"That was just to cheer you up, Mike. I'll do my best with the Professor, but as I said earlier, no promises. See you later."

"Thanks, Ernst, I really enjoyed that."

Mike went back to his room. He was tired and lay on his bed, but he couldn't settle, not while his bolster was so strangely hard and lumpy. Mike tried to have a sleep but couldn't. He felt around, hoping a mouse or even a rat hadn't crawled under his bolster and died, but he had to find out why he couldn't get comfortable. After a further root around inside the bolster, he pulled out a solid crystal type object, shaped just like the Academy. "Useless pile of junk!" Mike flung his basic model TMG to the other side of the room and again lay back on the bed, totally cheesed off. He then heard a sly little laugh. He sat up to see Ernst in the doorway. Ernst then threw Mike a brand new TMG, valid for all points north, south, east and west, and for prolonged stays.

"Fantastic! Thanks! How did you manage to change his mind?!"

"Actually, I didn't have to, I walked in and he was already sorting one out for you. When I asked him why he was letting you have one after all, he just said, and don't repeat this d'ya hear me, 'VOT ZE 'ECK!'"

"Thanks again, Ernst, it's absolutely brilliant."

Ernst just smiled and walked off. This left Mike with the thorny problem of how to deal with Vincent and Juliette. He certainly felt a lot better, but part of this was to do with his brand new ability to be free of them, or, if he was totally honest, it was a way of dealing with the feelings of insecurity that had set in. These were concerning his misperception of their true feelings towards him.

Mike had a plan that he thought would solve the problem for everyone. He wasn't the most confident boy in the world when it came to emotional matters, but he knew he had to try.

As for the siblings, they had concocted a plan based on Vincent's belief that Mike was simply fed up of the latest delays and was home-sick, or perhaps School-Dutch-Leo-Madeline-Abigail sick — or both. They knew they could not help him get back home or to be with his school friends, so they thought the next best thing would be to take his mind off things and so had a surprise waiting for him, or rather, surprises. These were piled up on the table as they waited for their dinner.

Mike came sauntering in to the dining room, but it was a false swagger. Inside he felt terrible, but he just had to go through with it. He looked around the tables. Although the place was quite busy he saw a space on a table to the side of the dining room, the trouble was he had to walk past the end table where Vincent and Juliette always sit, where he had also sat up to now.

"Oh well, here goes. They don't want to know anyway, so they'll be just as relieved as me," he thought to himself. "Hello, OK?" said Mike as he walked right past them over to the tables along the sidewall. He was very glad that he was in the seat facing the wall. His self-perceived treachery prevented him from being able to look directly at either of them. He was also glad of his dinner companion. It was Bertie, the human jukebox.

"You don't mind my sitting here, do you?" Bertie just shook his head. "That was great the other night! Do you do that all the time?" Bertie just shook his head. Mike guessed that he only understood a little English, and couldn't speak it at all. He thought of how to engage in conversation with him, nothing complicated, just things where nods, shakes and shrugs would do.

The meal was duck a l'orange. Mike wrestled with the tiny bones but he couldn't help but jettison pieces of duck, bones and sauce from his plate onto his front, and onto other diners' tables.

"Eat up, Peregrine, he's at it again!" came the familiar voice of the City gent, who unfortunately had indeed returned. "The Top-Deck for us in future, and I mean it this time!"

Mike managed to free a minute slither of duck from the slimy, bony mess which only three minutes before had been presented with great pride by Aldo

the Michelin Chef.

Mike returned to his riveting conversation. He noticed that Bertie was not having any trouble with his meal, and seemed to be enjoying it immensely.

"You like this ducky orange malarkey, don't you?" Bertie just shook his head. Mike was confused, maybe it was still too complicated. "Good grub, yeah?" Bertie just shook his head. "Bad grub?" Bertie just shook his head. "If you understand me at all, then – er – nod your head if you can. . . " Bertie just shook his head.

Mike gave up and returned to his decimated duck. Unfortunately his fork became stuck in between a couple of the larger bones. When Mike managed to wrestle it free, a piece of meat shot off his fork and straight into Bertie's mouth. Bertie stood up, and then at the top of his voice —

'. . . YOU PUT YOUR LEFT LEG IN!
YOUR LEFT LEG OUT!
IN OUT! IN OUT! SHAKE IT ALL ABOUT. . . !'

Mike just sat there stunned. There was uproar in the dining room. Everyone was yelling for the cacophony to stop. The City gents made good their earlier promise and left, and Mike could even hear one or two diners directing their complaints towards him. "Miller again! I think the Professor should send a Spellex to old Zenith, saying, 'He's yours! Come and get him!'"

Mike didn't know what to do.

Forgetting that he was the new Mr Independent who didn't need anyone else, he even looked over to the end table. The siblings were gone, what's more, they'd left behind them a pile of bits and pieces, strewn all over the table.

At that moment, Marina came rushing over with a small bottle of greeny-blue liquid. "I 'ope ziss verks," she said, as she tried to get Bertie to drink it.

With Bertie being attended to, Mike's curiosity got the better of him and he walked over to where Juliette and Vincent had been sitting. There was a bag of bagels from New York, tons of chocolate bars, a case of Coca-Cola, a huge packet of Jelly Wizards, and even a Wiggly Spearmint Tum.

There were three concert tickets to see the latest X Factor UK tour, and two tickets to see *'The Steven 'Dynamo' Frayne Magic Show'* – at the Blackpool Royale, no doubt – thought Mike. There was also the Board Game Magiconopoly, and finally, a signed authorisation from Professor Ren Stannich for five persons to go on a long weekend to an approved annexe. Stamped right across this last item, in red ink, was – *'VALID ONLY WHEN DEEMED VIABLE'*. Juliette's incessant pleading had resulted in a compromise. They could go, but only when her father said they could, and only if at least one adult went with them.

Mike felt very, very guilty. He wasn't daft and he knew what Vincent and Juliette had done. They'd even broken the rules regarding magic sweets to make him feel better – even Juliette! To Mike that was like Abigail and

Madeline donning balaclavas, putting mud on their faces and saying, 'Who's for smashing up the library?!', or perhaps Dutch and Leo bursting into tears upon hearing of the loss of the school's only copy of the unputdownable classic, Quantum Physics for the Studious Wizard.

"All this, for me!" Mike thought. "And look how I've repaid them!"

To the (very painful) strains of 'START SPREADING THE NEWS . . . I'M LEAVING TODAY. . . !', Mike left Marina struggling to shut Bertie up, gathered all the things from the table, and went back to his room, feeling as miserable as anyone could ever possibly be.

There was also the problem of how to spend the rest of his evening. After what had just happened, even his new TMG was of no compensation to him, but he forced himself to use it nevertheless.

He carefully placed all of the tragic gifts in the corner and then made his way to the sixth oak door. Then he realised something: just where could he go with his new TMG?

Mike had been to quite a few places with his parents, most of which he had enjoyed a great deal, but would his TMG take him there now? He set the magic crystal into its place on the door.

"Exmouth!" Nothing happened, so his trip to a seaside resort in Devon was off. "Land's End! Torquay! The Mumbles!" all were met with the same underwhelming response from his TMG. Nothing.

Out of frustration, Mike decided on his parting shot: "OH FLIPPIN' HEMLOCK HALL!"

No sooner had he yelled than Mike thought he could hear someone reply, but way off in the distance. "Mike! No! Don't!"

Too late. Mike now found himself at the front entrance to the school.

"Wow!" said Mike, as he walked off to find his school friends, and leaving behind – for a short while at least – the upset he had caused earlier on. . .

(A Short while earlier. . .)
"Hiya, Mike!" said a beaming Juliette. "Hi, Mike . . . MIKE? . . . What's up with him now?!" exclaimed Vincent. Their faces fell. They watched with disbelief as Mike – after a forced hello – went and sat with Bertie. The siblings said nothing, not even to each other. Juliette pushed her plate aside, Vincent pushed his plate aside but pulled it back again and recommenced eating his dinner. Juliette looked down, she was trembling.

At that moment, Ellen happened to walk in. She wasn't working but wanted to know what they were all up to later, including Mike. "Oh, dear." She just stood there with her arm around Juliette's shoulder. "This has gone on long enough, Vincent. I haven't told your father that you've still been upsetting your sister, but I'm going to now! Where is Mike, by the way?"

Vincent, well used to getting the blame, rightly or wrongly, stayed calm and explained recent events.

Ellen gave a big sigh. With red, glaring eyes she looked over to where Mike had commenced his pointless conversation with Bertie. She comforted her

friend who was sobbing her heart out. "Come on, Jules, he'll be gone soon. He's not worth crying over – the spotty oaf!"

"I was only trying to be friendly! I just thought I'd get him some things to cheer him up! I don't know why he's acting like this!" said Juliette, and cried even more.

Mike at this point was totally unaware of the upset on the end table, because he had just unwittingly put the jukebox on. Bertie blared away.

Ellen and Juliette left the table amid the painful rendition of the 'Hokey Cokey' by Lex Hargreaves, a particularly bad London born singer and alleged comedian.

Vincent shouted to his sister over the racket, "CAN I HAVE YOURS?"

Juliette stormed back to the table. "Here! Have it!" and flung the contents of her plate all over Vincent, and then scrubbled up the assorted gifts which were to have been for Mike. Vincent, in no fit state to carry on his meal, also left, but kept a sensible distance from the terrible two.

Mike arrived at Hemlock Hall well after dinner. He knew that his friends were most probably in the common room, discussing this and that, eating sweets and perhaps doing their homework. He ran in through the Main Hall, up the staircases, arrived at the dormitory, unnecessarily shouted 'CAMELOT!' – and ran right along to the common room. Yes! There they were. They were sitting at one of the tables all poring over an assortment of books.

"I hope Mike's OK," said Madeline.

"So do I," said Leo, "things aren't the same when we're not all together."

"I don't know if it's just a rumour or not, but I've heard that he's OK but just can't get back here for some reason," added Abigail. "Poor lad."

"Well I'm back now!" shouted a triumphant Mike.

His friends gave big broad grins and turned around to where Mike, after literally bursting into the common room, had shouted from. However, standing right next to Mike was Tobias.

"Tobias, you clot! You were warned!" jeered Dutch.

Big Tobias Jordache stood there with huge webbed feet. He had not believed the stories of the effects of Chinese Flipper Fruits, but now had no option but to believe every word. The four friends quickly lost interest as Tobias's own little gang fussed over him.

"Shame. I miss him about the place, especially when he messes up in Corny's class and he gets on his back! Brilliant!" said Dutch. He was only joking, but it did not seem so to Mike.

"Just you wait, France! You'll get yours!" shouted Mike at the top of his voice. This was yet another phrase which Mike had picked up, mostly from old gangster films; again he didn't know what it really meant, and he often said to himself, 'Get your what?' But it sounded good – to Mike at least.

Mike had not yet twigged that they could neither see nor hear him, but he did realise that the window was open and that it was quite windy outside.

"That's why," thought Mike. Also, he was not in their clear line of vision.

"Only one thing for it," he said to himself. He walked right up to Leo, shouted, "How are you doing, me old mucker?! Miss me?" and slapped him on the back, or at least he tried to. His hand went right through Leo and with his hand not having anywhere to stop, he lost his balance and fell right down onto the floor, this was at the same time as a group of students came in the room just as another started to leave. Each and every one of them walked all over him, but their feet went right through his body – not noticing Mike at all. It finally dawned on him that things were not quite right. As the last pair of shoes went right through his spine, making him go "WWWWHHH-HHRRRRRRRR" for the umpteenth time, although this was more through thought than a real sensation, he got up and decided to stay a while regardless.

"Don't be mean, Dutch. Mike could be in real danger, you know. You wouldn't like to lose a real friend like Mike, would you?" asked Madeline.

"No, of course not, I think Mike's great, you know that! So do my mum and dad. I sure wish they'd worry about me as much!"

While Dutch and Abigail chatted away, Leo and Madeline then spent a minute or so looking at one book in particular. Mike was confused. Due to Madeline being so much brighter than Leo, he'd never have expected these two to join forces on homework so harmoniously together, it was puzzling. As he mused on this most unlikely scenario, Mike then heard Madeline say something which would kerfuffle him for some time. . .

"What I miss about him most, is that for a really average student, even mediocre sometimes—"

"Don't forget, terrible on occasions," jumped in Leo, going with the flow.

"Yes – that, too – terrible on occasions, but he comes through it all with flying colours. He really tries hard, doesn't he? He struggles with quite a few things – but – somehow – up against brighter and better students – somehow, he still holds his own. That's what I miss him for – good, honest, hard work when he knows he's far from competent – at times."

Mike couldn't believe this. "Some friends I've got here! When I get back here for good, someone's got some explaining to do!" With that, Mike stormed off to have a poke around the rest of the school. What he didn't see and maybe would have done if he had stayed a short while longer, was the title of the book Madeline and Leo were reading – *'Poor Wizard made Good – A play by Andromeda Smith'*.

"Shall we start again, Leo? Right then: Act one. 'What I miss about him most. . . '"

A few moments later, a still fuming Mike found himself outside Professor Winch's office. "I wonder," said Mike to himself.

"Don't wonder, Mike, come right in."

"What?! But no-one can see me here! Not even you – can you?!"

"No, Mike, I cannot, you are right on this occasion, but I can indeed talk to you, courtesy of the telemagickeraph, even to someone who has made an unauthorised transmutation."

"Ah, but if you can't see me, how did you know I was right outside your office?!" said a cheeky Mike.

"I can't see you, I've just said so, but Professor Stannich can. He came here right after you and straight to my office. I believe that at the moment he is looking right at you from the small window above my door. Look up and say hello, then do come in!"

Mike looked up. Looking down right at him was Ernst.

"Hello there, Mike!" said Ernst, smiling and waving. Mike waved back and shouted, "Hello, Ernst!"

"DO COME IN! NOW!" shouted Professor Winch.

Mike walked in, and he was pleased that it was Ernst rather than his elder brother, although he hadn't realised he was also a professor until that moment.

"This is a very complicated situation, Michael. I can't see you but you can see me, as can Professor Stannich. I will address both of you using the three-way telemagickeraph. I will hear you on it when you reply. Understood?"

"Understood, Professor," replied both of his invisible visitors.

Unlike Professor Pendragon's seemingly obsolete model, Professor Winch simply spoke down a seashell attached to the rest of the machine.

"First of all, Mike, you haven't done anything wrong, it's our mistake." At that he coughed and Ernst in return went bright red. Professor Winch continued. "Someone – simply forgot to tell you that the magic link between here and the Academy has not yet been fully established. What's more, someone – forgot to put the Voiding spell on any attempts to transmute here while things were being finalised. You've had a lucky escape, Mike, you could have ended up anywhere, but thankfully that did not happen. Still, you are safe and sound and you've seen your friends I believe, although I daresay they did not see you. So, Mike, because of incomplete spells—"

"Spelling mistakes!" jested Mike.

"Shut up, Mike. As I was saying, because of incomplete spells you are not really here in the true sense, so it's not as if you can stay. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Professor, I understand."

"So, with that, Mike – I must ask you to go back to the Academy, right away, with Professor Stannich."

"I will, Professor, but before we go, can I just ask one thing?"

"Oh there's a novelty! Yes, Mike, what is it?"

"How did you know Erns' – er – Professor Stannich was here, and how has he managed to—"

"—OK, Mike," cut in the headmaster, "do you have fifty years spare by any chance? You do? Good! Pull up a seat. Now . . . when I was eighteen, I enrolled at Lesterjester University for a Degree in Modern Mystery. I then—"

"—Sorry, Professor, silly question, we'd better go. Bye, and thank you," said Mike.

"Bye," said a yet again relieved Professor Winch.

Mike and Ernst were soon back in the passageway at Krickenstaltz.

"Sorry about that, Mike, but I didn't think you'd choose to go there. Not too many kids would make a special trip back to their school, not even Hemlock Hall."

"No, I suppose not," said Mike, whose mind was back on other things.

"I suppose I'd better explain," said Ernst. "Although my brother is in charge overall, it's my job to set up the transmutagenic spells and then monitor them carefully. Even more importantly I'm supposed to put Voiding spells on everything until my brother and I are absolutely certain we've got it right. And so — er — are you OK, Mike?"

Mike had not really been listening and seemed far away.

"Er — yes, your brother is in charge of the overalls, was it?"

"Yes, Mike, my brother is in charge of the overalls. Is there still something you haven't told me?"

"Ernst, can I have a word with you over something important?"

Ernst was actually glad that Mike wasn't dwelling on his possible incompetence, and was only too willing to talk about something else.

"Surely, Mike, surely, fire away."

" . . . And that's what happened. I feel really stupid. I'm very angry with myself, and of course, I really am very, very sorry."

"OK, Mike — fortunately, here at the Academy, we have a special, really powerful spell to make people forgive and forget, and to make everybody friends again."

Mike was delighted. "Really? That would be brilliant."

"Yep," said Ernst, "it's called apologising."

Ernst looked at Mike with an understanding smile. Mike smiled back and gave a little chuckle.

"You're right, Ernst. Of course you are."

Mike had to make rather a late night of it to fetch a few things. Eventually he returned. He didn't linger in his room but went next door, took a deep breath, and knocked.

"Come in . . . "

Mike, after taking another deep breath, and perspiring into the bargain, opened the door and walked into the room.

"Oh — it's you. . . " said Vincent after seeing who his visitor was. He then just turned away and carried on smoking a cigarette.

Mike's well prepared speech was ruined; he just couldn't believe it. "What are you doing?! You'll make yourself sick!"

Vincent took a long, luxuriant drag, deliberately of course, and did not turn back around to face Mike.

"So! What's it to you?! You don't want to know me, or Jules for that matter. And I certainly wouldn't knock on her door, you'll be the one that gets sick!"

Mike, maybe fighting a losing battle, ignored Vincent's smoking and proceeded as originally intended.

"Vince, I'm really sorry, I really am. I was that worried over the both of you thinking you had to look after me, and – erm – be my friend, that—"

"Friend?! *FRIEND?!*" yelled Vincent, finally turning to face Mike. "Do you know, I was really pleased with how things have been since you turned up, but it's all ruined now! For your information, I don't have any friends! Not in this dump! Or Blackpool — or the Swiss Alps for that matter! Now get lost!"

Vincent quickly turned away again and puffed on his cigarette. He had tears in his eyes.

"Vince, I'm sorry, I've never been in this situation before. I just felt vulnerable and thought I might be intruding on you and Jules, I just panicked. Look, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, that's all I can say. I've been and got some stuff to make it up to you and Juliette. I saw what you and Jules got, it's brilliant." Mike stood there, hoping for some reaction – nothing.

"OK, Vince, I know it was all my fault, I'm very sorry, I really am, but that's all I can say and do. Sorry." He put Vincent's goodies down next to his chair and went to walk out. He wasn't at all sure whether to go and see Juliette, but he had no need – Juliette was standing there and had been for some time.

Mike just stood there looking very downcast. Eventually he spoke up.

"Here you are, Juliette, here's some things I've got you to make up for being horrible. I'm not normally like that, and I'm very, very, very sorry. Bye." He walked past Juliette and reached the door.

"Mike."

He slowly turned back round.

"It's OK, thanks for the gifts, it's OK." Juliette was still crying, a little, as she'd been so hurt, but she forgave Mike and gave him an understanding smile.

Mike just stood there; he didn't know what to do or say. Juliette walked across and gave him a big hug. Mike felt even more awkward and blushed heavily.

"Who's gone all red, then?!" came the familiar voice of a happy again Vincent. "Well, Mike! Do we punch each other in the shoulder and break wind? Or can I have a hug as well?!"

Two shoulder punches and three farts later (Vincent farted twice), all three were going through their respective goodies from around the globe: a book: *'Wolf-Whales – Truth or Fiction?'*, satin scarves, cowboy hats, sombreros, castanets, Blackpool Rock, loads of other gear and sweets, as well as the stuff the siblings had bought.

Juliette, amongst all the laughter, still managed to tell Vincent off for smoking – and apologised for farting.

29

Double Bubble For Jean Michelle

PROFESSOR WINCH had returned to Hemlock Hall only a short time after trying with his hand-picked posse to travel to Krickenstaltz. This was in the hope of getting Mike Miller away from the danger zone. He smiled to himself at the potentially dangerous but in the end very comical events of the night before when Mike had transmuted to the school. He was glad that he seemed safe and reasonably happy at Krickenstaltz, but what now occupied Professor Winch's mind was how much longer this could possibly last. He drummed his long bony fingers on his desk. This was always a good indication that a plan was forming in his mind.

Eventually Professor Winch stopped drumming his fingers, nodded gravely, and he decided on his first course of action.

He got up and went into the annexe, a smaller room at the side of his office, area, a normal, usual annexe that did not magically transport him anywhere. He opened a cupboard and lifted out what looked like a typewriter with a seashell attached. It was his telemagickeraph mark five which he had received only a few hours earlier. The box it came in bore the legend *'NOW WITH DUAL DIMENSION CONFERENCING FACILITIES!'* However, on this occasion it was purely a regular person to person call, this was to Professor Ren Stannich, Director of the Academy at Krickenstaltz.

"Hello, Ren, can you hear me? It's Gabriel."

The sounds that came back to Professor Winch were a strange combination of the rolling waves of the Indian Ocean, interspersed with a different kind of watery sound. This was of the enclosed, warm, frothy and bubbly kind, but there was also something else, or more accurately, someone else.

With his favourite loofah acting as a microphone, Professor Ren Stannich lay in a deep, sunken bath inside a bamboo hut on a Mauritian shore, and for a short while, forgot his woes:

'IN ZE TOWN, VER I VOZ BORN!
ZER LIVED A MAN, 'OO ZAILED TO ZEA!
AND 'E TOLD US OV IZ LIFE,
IN ZE LAND OV ZUMBARINES! ZO VE ZAILE—'

"— REN! CAN YOU HEAR ME?! IT'S GABRIEL! REN!"

"BY ZE VISKERS OV MERLIN'S CAT! 'OO IZ ZISS DIZTURBING MY BATH?"

"EETZ – er – it's me, Ren, it's Gabriel. We must speak, it is urgent."

"Ah, Profezzor Vinchy! Can't you see I iz 'azzing my bath?"

"Er – thankfully, no, I can't – but I can certainly hear!"

"Ah, ze Bootles! You like, yez?"

"Yes, I – er – think they're great, but we must speak of important things, Ren, it can't wait."

"Not even ze five minitz, no? Just zo I get ze voshed, and, 'ow you say, ze dryded?"

Professor Winch sighed.

"Five minutes, Ren, no longer."

"Zat iz fine, zank you. . . VE ALL LIVE IN ZE YELLOW ZUMBARINE, YELLOW ZUMBARINE. . . "

Eventually, twelve minutes later, Professor Ren Stannich was dried and dressed and ready to discuss urgent matters with his superior, Professor Winch.

"Thank you, Ren, I must get my watch fixed."

"Vot?!"

"Nothing. Now to business: the task, or should I say the tasks that lie ahead of us, as difficult as they undoubtedly will be, have at least become clear. We have to somehow stop Professor Zenith and his followers from teaming up with the Warlocks of Bucharest."

"I know ziss, but ve 'av, I zink, impossible task. Boze ze book and ze vond are gone, yez? Zo vot can be done now?"

"The book and the wand are comparatively harmless until brought together, which I don't think has happened, so it is a reasonable assumption that neither of the enemy camps have managed to meet up and combine their powers. We have at least a fighting chance of keeping it this way. Ren, my friend, we will also have to reactivate the Magic Army."

"VOT?! ZISS IZ IMPOZZIBLE! Ze Magic Army voz dizbanded years ago, after ze Leprechaun vars! Ze soldiers 'oo still 'appen to be – er – around, are far too old to be fighting."

"We don't know that for certain, Ren. Our Asian brethren have, as we know, preserved them very well indeed. In any event I think it's worth a go, and with this in mind it will be necessary for you to assume your old rank of overall commander of the Eastern Division, and I, the West."

"Vot iz ziss?! I vill not be in charge ov ze overalls! I vont my old job back!"

"Ren, I didn't mean—"

"Do not vurry, I voz making viz ze funniez. Gud joke, yez?!"

"Good joke, Ren, great. However, the Magic Army will not be enough to stop such evil. We need to find a way of getting Mike to safety. This on its own is of the highest importance to me, just for Mike's own sake, but if we manage to do this then we may be able to also ensure the survival of Krickenstaltz, thus the World. Even if Professor Zenith is banging on the door, he'll never get in without Mike, or for that matter, Aloysius."

"Yez, Alleyvicious . . . 'az you 'eard from 'im yet?"

"Er – no, we haven't, and I'm getting worried. If by some terrible stroke of fate he's now in Professor Zenith's hands, then he won't even need Mike. More of this later, but for now, Ren, I have to tell you that I haven't just

contacted you to tell you to dust down your old uniform, I've also decided to call a meeting, both sides of the full council, and as strong a gathering of the general and federated membership as we can muster."

"A meeting?! Ov all ov uz? But where? 'Ow vill you do ziss?"

"We will all meet at the Top-Deck Restaurant in Blackpool. If we had time on our hands, I'd ask you all to put your sou'westers on and sail over, or better still us come to you, but that, unfortunately, is not a viable option. Nor can we leave Krickenstaltz unmanned for any length of time, nor can there be any delays. Nor can we expect our rather ancient colleagues to make any untoward journeys, so it will have to be the Top-Deck, for both speed and safety."

"I knowz zis! Ov courze I knowz zis! But you still cannot get to zer! It iz magick annexe! Az you know, ze annexez can only be reached from Krickenstaltz. You, ze great Vinchypants ze virst, may well be be able to poopz in and outz ze place, but you cannotz all pozzibly come 'ere, zo 'ow ze 'eck do you all get to Blackenstaltz?"

"By travelling as ordinary folk, not to you, but to Blackpool. It shouldn't be any problem, really."

"Yez, but zen ve cannot meet up!"

"You forget, Ren. Jean Michelle?"

"Ah, yez, Jean Michelle, ov courze, 'ow stoopid ov me to forget! Er – vot 'az Jean Michelle got to do viz ziss?"

"So, you have forgotten?"

"Er – yez, zorry."

"Jean Michelle isn't just the proprietor within the magic dimension of the Top-Deck, he runs the non-magic side of things at the same time. You've obviously forgotten that we tried to stop him, but he went ahead and did it anyway. It would seem as if his frowned upon endeavours may now just come in handy."

Ren was sweating, but it was not through tropical heat or post-bath perspiration.

"I'm zorry, Gabriel, I do not follow, pleeze explain."

"We both know that Blackpool is a Parallel Annexe. By taking great care and paying attention to detail, we were able to make much of Blackpool available to those who live and work at Krickenstaltz. Correct?"

"Yez, but by 'olding ze meeting in ze ordinary Blackenstaltz, ve run ze very real risk ov being – er – found out – yez? Any special meetings ov ze magick volk vud mean ve vud be noticed, and zat vud not do."

"Well, Ren, what I propose is indeed far from perfect, but despite that, I can see you have totally forgotten something, haven't you? Let me – er – refresh your memory. Jean Michelle, your old chef, was never content with meagre wages at Krickenstaltz, so he opened up the Top-Deck in Blackpool, but purely magic business and magic money was not enough for him. That is why, literally, and metaphorically, he wanted the best of both worlds. He somehow tampered with magic energy in a way which allowed him full

access to the non-magic society of Blackpool. He did this by using some powerful but highly illegal spells of – er – his own. Jean Michelle's little domain became a Dual Dimension within the Parallel Dimension, occupying the same time and space but still allowing him to flit between the two at will. This way he runs one restaurant, needing only one kitchen, one set of furniture and yet makes twice the profit."

"Er – yez, very ingenious, I seem to remember zum ov ziss, but it iz very vague in my memory. Such long time ago."

"Some people say he had an accomplice – someone who in return for a sizeable cut of the profits, jupiters as well as pounds sterling, would help with the spells needed and keep the WFW off his back. We never did find out who this was."

"Er – no, zey never did, zo I 'ave 'eard!"

"Quite, quite. However, I digress, and so back to the matter at hand. If we travel as ordinary folk to Blackpool we can go to the non-magic Top-Deck, while you and your entourage will transmute as normal to the magic Top-Deck. Finally, we will get Jean Michelle to arrange the restaurant in two sections, separate from each other. This will allow both halves of the conference to have their own area but we would all still be together. One point I do take though, Ren, as much as we can fool ourselves into thinking otherwise, although the Hemlock Hall contingent will make up one half of the gathering in a Dual Annexe bodge up, we will indeed still be visible to all and sundry, or at least might be. However, if JM can just take the usual precautions, stating it's a private function, things like that, we should be OK. If something goes awry, well, we'll just deal with it as best we can."

"Yez, yes, zat zoundz OK, but ztill, 'ow do ve communicate? Az you say, ve – er – Jean Michelle runs ze place az strictly a Dual Dimenzion."

"I have a handy little gizmo right here in front of me, which I am using right now. It's the telemagickeraph mark five, which allows multi-party conversations across two dimensions, so that should do the trick."

"Yez, yez, soundz gud. Ven vud you like to meet, and 'oo do I bring?"

"Saturday evening is best, I think. I'll contact the Council myself, but please bring along the usual crew . . . oh, and bring Bertie, after making the usual modifications. I will be bringing several of the staff from Hemlock Hall and a few old boys and girls. I will contact Jean Michelle in advance to let him know the somewhat unorthodox seating arrangements."

"Vy Bertie? Are ve going to sing our vay to vicktory?"

"If we do, then it will all be down to Bertie, I think."

"On ze uzzer 'and, Profezzor Zenith 'az never 'eard my 'Bohemian Rhapzody', if 'e ever duz, 'e may turn tail and run!"

"He just might at that!"

The thick-skinned (but momentarily worried) good sport that was Ren Stannich, and the ever witty Professor Winch allowed themselves a minor chuckle before they returned to the gravity of the situation – or so they thought.

"'Ere! Wot's your game, pal?! Yoo'z 'ad yer bath! I'se got the Duke o' Magicombe a waitin' for his daily dip 'ere. Now – no more a talkin' to yesself an' 'op it! Go on!"

"Vot iz ziss?! Interrupting my bath! You do not talk to me like ziss! I am ze Director ov ze Krickenstaltz Academy!"

"Yeah, and I'se ole crater-face Winchy. Now 'op it!" said Peter Wimpole, knowing full well who his current customer was.

At this point, Professor Winch thought it wise to terminate the call.

"Never mind, Ren, remember the old adage, Never upset a Wimpole! We might need a lift one day! One last thing, though, bring Mike and your two, I've got a surprise for them. Oh, and invite Ellen, Juliette's friend. See you Saturday, goodbye for now, old friend."

Ren Stannich was glad to leave the irksome bath attendant Peter Wimpole far behind, but also glad that his conversation with Professor Winch had not continued along a certain path.

He returned to Krickenstaltz.

*

After the disastrous misunderstandings between Mike, and Juliette and Vincent, the rift was quickly healed. The very wise and understanding Juliette realised Mike's worries, and told him that to her and Vincent a friend was someone who could, in the right way of course, take his or her friends for granted. Mike could take it for granted that he was included in their daily routine. He could take it for granted that there would be no private whisperings, either between the siblings or between Juliette and Ellen. Mike already took it for granted that there would certainly not be any whisperings between Vincent and Ellie the Snitch.

When Mike heard all this he felt very humbled, and assured them he felt the same way in return, which he did. They all become friends again and all wanted it to stay that way.

After breakfast the three youngsters were called in to the office of Professor Ren Stannich. They were then joined by Ellen and Bertie.

"Sit down, all ov you, pleeze. Do not vurry, ziss iz not anyzing bad, zer vill be no boominkz and shoutinkz today. I am certain you vill be pleezed to 'ear zat you are all being inviteded to ze Blackenstaltz, ziss Zaterday evening. Gud, yez?"

The assembly all looked at each other, mystified, Mike more so than the others as he had not got a clue as to what they had just been told. As for the siblings and Ellen, they all liked Blackpool for nights out, but what could be so good or important for Professor Stannich to herald such an evening, which they thought they could just as easily organise themselves?

"'Oh, and Mike, pleeze be on your best behaviour, Profezzzor Vinch vill be zer. Wiz ze exception ov you, Bertie, ze rest ov you can vamooze, to do vot you ver going to do before I called you. Bye, ov you go!"

Ellen went back to work and the still confounded youngsters trooped down the corridor. A little while later they were sitting in the Junior common room.

Courtesy of Juliette, Mike learned that Blackenstaltz was actually Blackpool. As for Vincent, he was at a total loss as to why Mike's headmaster would be there. He was even more astounded to find that Mike was actually looking forward to seeing him.

"Let me see if I've got this right. You're all smiles – in fact, like Clint Eastwood, it's made your day – because your HEADMASTER FROM SCHOOL is coming with us on a night out! You must be off your rocker, mate," mocked a flabbergasted Vincent.

"No, honest! He's not like an ordinary headmaster! He really is a great bloke."

"Listen, Mike, you're forgetting one thing. Jules and me—"

"—And *I*, Vincent," interrupted Juliette.

"Shut it. Jules and me 'ave had more than one magic headmaster. The first one was so 'orrible—"

"Horrible. Hu! Hu! With an H — horrible."

"Will you shut up?! He was so . . . bad, that I played truant for a year, forging sick notes, dead grannies, snow-bound, the lot."

"What happened?"

"I buried my third granny, you know, the old one granny too many routine. Ole Grunty wrote to my dad – and next thing I was back at school and grounded for a year."

"Was that his real name, Grunty?"

"Just his nickname. His real name was Balthazar Grunt. Used to call him Pigface at first, all the kids did, but Dad heard me, and, Wallop!"

"What! Your father hit you?!"

"No, of course not. He sent me to Wallop, a school for badly behaved boys. Soon pulled me socks up there, I can tell you."

"What? Dead strict and that?"

"Nah, it was in the Shetland Islands, me feet were freezing!"

"Are you telling me the truth?!" chuckled Mike.

"Nope."

As Mike indulged in more inane chatter with Vincent, and as the ever grammatically correct Juliette butted in with annoying corrections, back at Hemlock Hall, Mike's school friends were about to receive their invitation to Blackpool. . .

"Corny's not here! Great!" said Dutch.

"Well, I'm not happy about it. I was actually looking forward to combined sciences class, I've been getting better recently," said Madeline.

"Yeah, but no thanks to Corny. You're as good as he is any day. I wouldn't mind betting Professor Winch asks you to fill in while he's gone."

A blushing but highly pleased Madeline hid her face in her hands.

Dutch chuckled. "Make that last, M, that's the second compliment I've given you this week, that'll have to last you the rest of the school year."

"I'm skint by the way, Dutch," said Madeline as she finally peered out from

behind her hands.

"What do you mean by that?!" said Dutch, pretending to be offended.

"I think she means that you only said—" went to say Leo, but he was cut off immediately by Dutch.

"Oh don't be soft, Leo, we're just joshing!"

"I think we should knuckle down and get on with something, you know," suggested Abigail.

Reluctantly the others agreed and opened their books. The friends had a free lesson, or at least it was free in their minds, but they had been told quite clearly by Professor Creek that they should read up on combined sciences in the common room — "There is no such thing as a free lesson in this school!" Leo hadn't quite been listening though, as he had been having problems negotiating the packet of his second meat pie of the morning. "Nor a free lunch!" added Professor Creek after confiscating the pie, but he had then winked at Leo on his way out.

The diligence and application to their tasks lasted less than three minutes.

"I wonder why we haven't been told anything of how Mike's doing?" asked Abigail.

"I don't want to worry you, but I think things are looking bad for Mike," replied Dutch.

"Oh don't say that, Dutch, don't get me worried, please!" pleaded Madeline.

"I'm with Dutch on this one, I also think you've reason to be worried," said Leo.

"Eat your pie, Porky," suddenly said Dutch.

"I've ate it, or I was going to, rather. What you don't realise is, it just doesn't add up, none of it."

"What do you mean, Leo?" asked Abigail.

"That story about an accident but that Mike was OK, but just couldn't get back here. . . " continued Leo.

"So?" said Dutch.

"Well . . . there was the official announcement to older children and parents that this Sabbatical carry on was first of all relocated to somewhere in Britain, and then another one shortly after to say it was cancelled altogether. I only found out about it through Auntie letting it slip. Mike's in big bother, I'm sure of it," said Leo.

"Thanks, you lot, you've now got me very worried indeed," said Madeline, and rather unfairly at that, which did not go unanswered by Dutch.

"What do you want?! A load of old tosh?! Oh I know! Try this for size: Mike has won the Sabbatical hands down, managing to finish eleven months ahead of the rest, and because of this magnificent achievement has gone on the holiday of a life time to Barbados, where he'll spend all day drinking champagne in a sunken bath in a bamboo hut!"

"You're letting your imagination get carried away again, Dutch," said Abigail. "And there's no need to be so sarc—"

"Ahem!" It was Professor Winch. "Not all day, Mister France, surely? His skin would wrinkle up."

"Er – sorry, Professor Winch, I was just— "

"Never mind, never mind. The inner workings of your mind would bamboozle Merlin himself. Right, you lot, follow me to my office, please. Right away!"

"Not all day? Merlin? He's mad," mused Dutch to himself as they all trooped after Professor Winch.

"Comfortable? Good," said Professor Winch, not waiting for an answer. Across his desk were the four rather bemused fifth formers who had just sat down in the largest and comfiest armchairs they had ever seen or sat in. "I am sorry if I seem abrupt, but I haven't much time. Now – the Sabbatical, as I'm sure you have already heard via the rumour mill and is something you shouldn't even know about anyway (he stopped, stared at Leo for a second, and then smiled), has been cancelled. Regardless of what crazy stories are currently doing the rounds, the decision to cancel was taken purely because of extremely bad weather and a few minor accidents (lied Professor Winch), and I stress minor, so no need to worry, Mike is fine. You may also have heard that Mike cannot return just yet; sadly, this is true, I cannot go into the details of why, again no time, but he truly is fine and he should be back with us all soon. Now, I know you are concerned for your good friend, but I hope that's enough to stop you all unnecessarily worrying about him and to enable you to concentrate fully on your studies. I now need to quickly move on.

"I would like all four of you to come with me and some of the other teachers to Blackpool this Saturday evening. It is still school business (again lied Professor Winch), and you'll be expected to help with general admin' tasks: carrying files, taking messages, that sort of thing. These semi-formal meetings happen every now and then and we always need a few bright students to help us out (yet again lied the professor). But I assure you, it will be more fun than work, and there'll be plenty of time to enjoy all Blackpool has to offer . . . well, most of what it has to offer. . ."

The lads smiled, the girls blushed.

Professor Winch had thought it expedient not to mention the real reason for the involvement of Mike's Hemlock Hall friends, at least to the very friends in question. It was of course all to do with Mike's expected presence in Blackpool on Saturday evening. The flim-flam offered up to Madeline, Abigail, Leo and Dutch was purely to keep their minds off Mike and to (hopefully) ensure some good solid work from the four for the rest of the school week. Ultimately, it had been an emotional decision. He hoped Mike would be back in the fold very soon, but in case this did not work out, at least Mike and his friends would have enjoyed a carefree fun-filled evening in Blackpool.

Professor Winch sensed he was about to be bombarded with questions. This would not do.

"OK, ladies and gents, I've kept you from your studies long enough. On to your next lesson, please."

The five knew that that was it, and the hand gestures, finger pointing and body movements which always precede urgent questions came to an abrupt halt. They all thanked their headmaster as they stood and left the room.

"There's something funny going on here," said Madeline, as they made their way to double geography. "Conferences on a Saturday night; students helping out – it just doesn't add up."

"Who cares?! Blackpool! And the Illuminations are on and the funfair's still open!" enthused Dutch. "You heard the man – more fun than work!"

"Do they sell pies there?" asked Leo.

"Yeah, tons of 'em! And fish and chips, and burgers, hot-dogs – the lot!" replied Dutch.

"And don't forget rock," said Abigail.

"Yeah, Madeline, who cares!" said Leo.

30

An Unwilling Partnership

(Two nights earlier. . .)
JOSH BEECHAM had just left Mike in the dead of night and transmuted to Aberystwyth – or so Josh thought. "Aberystwyth!"

At exactly the same time as Josh used his TMG, a wand was held out in a room a long way from either Krickenstaltz or Aberystwyth.

"Diverticum Reversio!" said a voice, while pointing the wand at a small, smoky, crystally 3D image of the Krickenstaltz Academy. This floated around over the middle of the desk in the room.

Josh looked around him. He should have been in the corridor of the Library of the University of Abracadrystwyth. He wasn't. Although wherever he happened to be was dark, the shapes in the shadows were familiar, very familiar. It was a room – an office – but although it seemed familiar to him he still wasn't totally certain where it was.

"Care for a nightcap, Josh?"

"Who's there? I warn you, I'm armed!"

"Very good, got two of 'em m'self, very useful. Do sit down. Here, I'll put the light on. ILLUMINATUM!"

Again, an arm was raised, holding out a golden wand with ancient inscriptions in deep burgundy along its side. The office lit up, Josh rubbed his eyes and then looked ahead.

"Professor Winch! What is going on?! Why have you brought me here?!"

"First of all, Josh, apologies for that rather dramatic change of destination. I knew I asked you to go to Aberystwyth, but there's been a hitch, I had to bring you here to discuss a few things first."

"Why couldn't you contact me before I transmuted? I thought I was done for!"

"I couldn't. I received some disappointing news shortly before you were to set off for the library, this was the only way."

"Fair enough, Professor. What's gone wrong?"

"Nothing we can't handle, but it does require a small change to our original plans. As you know, the library is run strictly as a Parallel Annexe. Normally that would be no problem, but unfortunately you will have company when you do finally arrive there."

"But how can that be, Professor? I was simply going to go to the library on our side and then straight back to Krickenstaltz. What has gone wrong?"

"The Addendum to the Book of Chaotagens is not in the magic dimension, it is on the non-magic side. It is to there that you have to go to."

"How did that happen? I thought the Addendum had been transmuted

there by Vlad the Impala, and that it was safely locked up in our vault?"

"So did I, until I contacted that imbecile, Principal Jones."

"What?! Forgetful Jones?"

"The very same. It appears that at the very moment Professor Zenith recited his Blocking spells, Vlad transmuted the Addendum and I think it affected the precision of the transmutagenic spell."

"But Professor! You said transmuting was unknown to Professor Zenith! So he knows after all?!"

"Easy, Josh, I still believe that to be the case. Professor Zenith, no doubt delirious at our seeming immobility, will not have any reason to suspect his spell has been nothing but a complete success. However, I do think the cosmic powers that were invoked by both spells – sort of clashed."

"What? Like the Blackpool Right-Angle?"

"Something like that."

"OK, it's in the non-magic side. I didn't think I'd have to mess about between the two dimensions but that's all right. It will take a bit longer, but I can't see any major problems. Without being disrespectful I still can't think of why you had to interrupt my transmuting. How did you do that, by the way?"

"As ever, Josh, by taking a risk and totally ignoring the wishes of the other members of the Council. Hemlock Hall is still not officially cleared to operate as an annexe of the Academy, but I had to take the chance."

"You mean you disturbed the magic energy of Krickenstaltz, just to bring me here?"

"Don't make me out to be a criminal, Josh. I had my reasons."

Professor Winch actually meant this jokingly, but sometimes Josh missed the lighter inflections in his boss's voice to indicate this. On this occasion it made Josh immediately sorry that he had seemed to pour scorn on his leader's reasoning.

"Sorry, Professor, I wasn't thinking, please accept my apologies. There is one thing, though, why you can't just do the same for Mike? Why not bring him here the same way."

"For two very important reasons, Josh. First of all, I will be in dead lumber when the Council next meets for bringing you here in the way I did, have no doubts about that. However, that does not concern me unduly. What would concern me far more is if I tried to bring young Mike back here in a similar fashion, and he vanished into thin air."

"Why on earth would such a thing happen?"

"It's all to do with Mother Nature. Non-aligned transmuting, which is how I interrupted your journey, poses not only a slight risk for adults but a very serious risk to those who are not yet fully formed. In other words, children. Just as I am too old for risky ventures, in some ways, Mike is too young, I think. He may be fifteen but he hasn't stopped growing and his muscles have not fully filled out. If we tried to instigate a non-aligned transmutation for Mike, he could just, disappear. We've got away with it once but that was

pure luck."

"I see what you mean, Professor, far too great a risk on this occasion."

"Yes, I'm afraid so, but even if he did make it, he would still have to return to Krickenstaltz at some point, so it would most likely all be a waste of time. Where were we? Oh, yes – the Addendum ended up on the shelf in the vault in the non-magic library, instead of the same shelf in our library. That would have been no problem if Jones had managed to resume his cover occupation as a cleaner and immediately crossed over to put it safely in our vault, but of course, he didn't."

"Why ever not?"

"Forgetful Jones was true to his nickname."

"That figures, but why can't you just remind him to go and do it now?"

"Because, Josh, he's since tried to do just that. He picks the Addendum up, crosses the dimensions, places it in our vault, but it immediately disappears and goes straight back."

"What's all that about, then?"

"It is because one-way transmutations for inanimate objects only have a five minute limit for crossing dimensions on arrival. Forgetful knew this, but he – er – forgot. It's a relatively new spell and that's the best that could be done. However, there are Improving spells that can be used to improve things."

"Well I'm certainly not trying to get out of going, Professor, but I'm no expert on such powerful magic, administered in the field, as it were. You really need an expert in transmutagenics, such as Professor Stannich or – Professor – er – Stannich. . . "

"Yes, either would be very handy right now, but I'm afraid they are tied up with urgent business in their own country."

Professor Winch looked a little concerned and began his characteristic finger twiddling. He continued:

"I would go myself, but I'm too busy here. There is, however – er – somebody else here who is equally qualified. I think you – er – know him and more to the point, you would both need to go."

"Who is that then, Professor?"

An awkward looking Professor Winch looked down at the floor and mumbled. "Here he is now, Josh."

Professor Ezekiel Creek was considered by most people who knew him to be a good man. This was a fair analysis, because he was indeed a good man, but most, was not all. One man loathed him – and the feeling was mutual. Such mutual hatred caused many a sleepless night and ever-greying hair for Professor Winch, a good friend to both men, and yet forced to be the piggy in the middle.

Although Mike's succession of vivid dreams had revealed the terrible mis-understanding between Josh and Ezekiel following old Grandfather Tunstall's demise and the loss of his estate – the truth was, there was already bad blood between the two cousins at that time, as well as soured relations with

Professor Cornstone. . .

*

Many years earlier, both Ezekiel and Josh had served together in the WSS in Shet-Nam. This is a small group of magic islands off the northeast coast of Scotland, existing parallel to the Shetland Islands. During the two men's posting there, the entire magic community went into a state of shock upon learning that the indigenous population of Shet-Nam had declared themselves to be independent from the rest of the country.

First, there had been riots in Wizwick, the largest town on the largest island. This was to escalate into armed conflict and the WSS were sent in. The Shet-Namese rebels had dug in deep, and the WSS, even with all their magic weaponry, had no option but to storm their positions in much the same way as any non-magic armies would do. The rebels repelled the WSS again and again.

Unfortunately for Ezekiel Creek, who was Captain of the Rearguard at that time, all this happened while he was enduring a conflict of interest. A short while earlier, Josh Beecham had dashed into the officers' quarters with news that Ezekiel's wife of only one year was dying, and if he wanted to see her one last time he must leave for home straightaway. He paced his quarters and then made the agonising decision that duty must come first. He was about to leave for his command post when Josh saw that he was not going home. Josh, thinking quickly on the hoof, furrowed his brow, put a finger to his lips, and then smiled and put a suggestion to his cousin – he would fill in for him. He reminded Ezekiel that most of his seniors did not know him by sight, and as for the junior ranks that did, he would keep them sweet, somehow. And as for speaking on the telemagickertape, a forerunner of the telemagickeraph, or even on the old fashioned field telephone, he could do a good impersonation of his voice. He promised Ezekiel that should any other problems arise he would think of something.

Shortly after, a very uncertain but nonetheless highly grateful Captain Ezekiel Creek was away home on his broomstick.

Josh Beecham's take-off of his friend, cousin and captain was perfect, but he did not have any contingency plans for when everything did indeed go wrong.

The rebels were sending over salvo after salvo of death-bolts from their battle-wands directly into the WSS front line. One death-bolt destroyed the shelter in which the Commander of the WSS task force, Colonel Max Carton, was busy sending a message via his adjutant to the Captain of the Rearguard. The colonel's message was – *'Send reinforcements, we are going to advance'.*

With all the noise from the incoming death-bolts and the resulting carnage and confusion, the message, sent after a short delay, sounded like – *'Send three and four-pence, we're going to a dance'*. Josh assumed that it had been one of the lads larking about, and so duly sent the three and four-pence to the front line, with a little note attached, saying *'Enjoy the dance,'*,

but he did not send any reinforcements. Although more through luck than anything else, no real harm was done; such a caper had neither hindered nor aided the war effort, and the extra troops were sent after only a short delay. Nevertheless, serious repercussions were to follow for one of the two comrades and cousins. However, any immediate enquiries and potential punishments were put on the back burner, as the WSS finally got the breakthrough they had been so desperate for.

A group of islanders had sneaked away from their evil war-masters, none other than Professor Gemini Zenith and his evil cohorts, The League of Mordred, and had escaped to the WSS lines.

They had informed the initially disbelieving top brass of the WSS that they had not wanted any part in the fighting at all, were not interested in independence, and nor was anyone else who lived on this magic archipelago. They also stated that it had been Zenith and his men who had been the ones behind the rioting, and had disguised themselves as islanders while they mounted attacks on the WSS. More importantly, the islanders went on to give the WSS vital information on enemy plans, positions and supplies.

Colonel Carton abandoned his mass attack and instead achieved victory through a series of stealth attacks upon enemy supply lines. Many of The League of Mordred died fighting, others fled, or were taken prisoner.

However, Colonel Max Carton did not forget his disregarded order nor the insubordination of Captain Creek. Unfortunately by this time it was once more the real Captain Creek. His sense of honour ensured he would not blame Josh – officially – but personally, it was a different matter entirely.

Ezekiel Creek was court martialed, found guilty of cowardice, and sentenced to ten years in a military prison, although immediately commuted to simply being thrown out of the WSS due to his previous exemplary service record.

As for his wife, she was in the middle of a game of whist when he had arrived back at their home. It had soon become clear that the message had actually been for a Corporal Croke.

The trouble was that Ezekiel believed Josh had done it deliberately. They were cousins and both men were loved by their grandfather and had been promised a large bequeathment in the old man's will as long as they stayed out of trouble. Ezekiel believed that Josh had engineered the whole thing to gain his supposedly wayward cousin's share of the estate.

To add to such torment, a short while after Ezekiel's cashiering his wife did indeed die.

Ezekiel's good lady had been waiting on the platform at the local railway station, to run to her devastated husband the minute he stepped off the train. She saw him – she ran – she fell – she tumbled on to the track – and went right under the train which was bringing Ezekiel Creek back home to his beloved Anna-Marie. Although it was (supposedly) of some comfort to Ezekiel to know that his wife's death had been instant and thus painless, in Ezekiel's mind she should not and would not have been there at all if he had not been

branded, and moreover, if there had not been cause to use traditional transport. Ezekiel had had no option but to travel by train after having had his broomstick ceremoniously broken in two by Colonel Carton.

To further complicate matters, Ezekiel never, ever believed Josh that his aunt had come to be owner of the Sweet Emporium through money left her by her late cousin, Alphonso Grubb.

From that moment on, Ezekiel Creek hated Josh Beecham. Such bitter memories made Ezekiel Creek take every opportunity he could to outdo, belittle, and insult his cousin and one-time friend and compadre, Josh Beecham.

Ezekiel had been informed a short while earlier of his headmaster's plan to send them both to Aberystwyth, although he was not aware of all the details concerning the Addendum – an extra page to Trevelyan's Book of Chaotagens.

At that point he thought it was all to do with Corrective Time Alignment spells. However, it was no surprise to find that the mere fact that he had been told first, put him in a superior position to Josh, at least that's what he believed.

"Hello, Beecham," said an unusually smug Professor Creek, while giving Josh Beecham a sneering look. Josh didn't return like with like, instead he totally ignored him and calmly spoke to Professor Winch.

"Professor, I really don't think this is a good idea. As you know, Creek hates the sight of me, and if I'm honest, I feel the same way about him."

Professor Winch went to say something, but he was beaten to it by an irate Ezekiel Creek.

"You are nothing but a thieving, misery-making con man, Beecham! Next time the peelers are here, I'll send 'em straight over to the trap door in the barn. Yes, that's right! You and old Harris! Nothing gets past me, Beechy Bonce!"

"Old Uncle Corny told you that, did he? I had him down for a snoop long ago, but I must admit, you've surprised me there, well . . . maybe not."

"And what do you mean by that!"

"Work it out for yourself! You were always the clever one!"

"Too right! How on earth you got your degree, I will never know."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! Or should I say, boys?! This will not do – it will not do at all! Although I'm not going to be naïve and ask you to shake hands and then all skip off down Lollypop Lane for some lashings of ginger beer and several slices of Aunt Molly's delicious seed cake – however – I do expect both of you to keep your differences out of my office. Such animosity you display toward each other cannot be allowed to influence or interfere with the important task you both have ahead of you. Understood?" demanded Professor Winch.

"Yes, Headmaster, but I don't have an Aunt Molly."

"Shut up, Ezekiel!" retorted Professor Winch, and meant it. "Do both of you understand?!"

"Yes, Headmaster, of course," said Professor Creek. "Of course, Professor," said Josh.

"Very good. Let us now discuss what happens next, but I think we can also have a little drop of something while we talk. Brandy, anyone?"

"Er – no, thank you, Headmaster," said Creek.

"No thanks, Professor," said Josh.

"Oh well, I'm not drinking on my own."

Professor Winch replaced the bottle of brandy in his desk drawer.

"You actually have two problems. The Magic Time-Space misalignment urgently needs correcting. To do this will mean a little bit of magic surgery, for want of a better phrase. Do you have all the necessary accoutrements, Ezekiel?"

"They are all packed up and ready, Headmaster, but don't expect me to explain it all to Beecham, he's not at my level and never will be."

"Now look here!" retorted Josh, but Professor Winch intervened.

"Your last warning, Ezekiel, any more and I'll go myself, you're not the only one here who can do transmutagenic spells, but I am needed here at Hemlock Hall. If I have to step in and do your work for you because of your feelings towards Josh, thus leaving Hemlock Hall rudderless, it will mean big trouble – FOR YOU! Finally, and without wanting to repeat myself again – DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!"

"Yes, Headmaster, please accept my apologies."

Josh, although not directly subjected to this further rebuke, diplomatically agreed. "Yes, Headmaster, sorry."

Professor Winch once again took the bottle of brandy out of the drawer. "I'm having one after all. I think I need it!"

Before he could continue, Josh, who had something niggling him at the back of his mind, spoke up.

"Er – Professor, you mentioned something about having company when I – er – we get there. What do you mean, exactly?"

"I was just coming to that, Josh, that is the second problem you will both have. As you know, the university library is usually closed overnight, but not at the moment. Forgetful has informed me, far too late, of course, that there will be a number of students there all night long, each night for the rest of the week. They are all members of the University Paranormal Society. After several recent reports of ghosts haunting the library, they have set up their equipment and are holding a week long stakeout, I believe this is the correct expression."

"Ghosts? I didn't know they had ghosts in the library," remarked Josh.

"They don't, but I'm almost certain one or more of The League of Mordred, either unwittingly or even deliberately to cause chaos among our ranks, has somehow registered on one of the society's detectors or monitors. It's something we could well do without at the moment, but there you are."

"But how can that be so? The League aren't ghosts, they are human."

"True, but they are also very powerful, very ingenious wizards. This is

something we forget at our peril."

"Yes, Headmaster, how very true, but what on earth are we going to do about it?"

"I've been thinking hard on that one, Ezekiel. I think it's time that the University of Aberystwyth had a concert."

"A what?!" said both Josh and Ezekiel Creek at the same time.

"Come in, Finbar," said Professor Winch.

Josh and Ezekiel both looked to the door and in walked or rather hovered near to the floor, a little Irishman dressed in green and gold and wearing a floppy, green, triangular hat.

"Gentlemen, please meet Finbar O'Reilly, Impresario of Ireland," announced Professor Winch.

"G'd evening to all 'ere! I am indeed, Finbar O'Reilly, and I am humbly at your service."

Finbar bowed as Josh and Ezekiel grinned from ear to ear at this strange little man's antics, but the unwilling partners were not grinning very long. Professor Creek went on to explain that the only way to carry out their work while in Abracadrystwyth University, was by fighting fire with fire. If the students wanted ghosts, they'd get them, and by the spadeful, but Professor Winch's idea was not to scare the living daylights out of the members of the Paranormal Society, but to distract them by entertaining them with some sort of supernatural show. This is where Finbar O'Reilly came into the proceedings.

Finbar had been a concert promoter centuries before, but had then died. The trouble was, nobody told him, so he just carried on arranging an Irish Showband here, a nun playing the harp there and even managed Ireland's premier harmony trio, the sugary-mumsy fish-friers from Belfast, the Spachelors. It was only when people screamed and ran away that he had an inkling that he just might be dead, or it may have been upon hearing the Spachelors, he wasn't sure. Still, he wouldn't give up, and from the other side he carried on booking spectrish artistes, but still of the blarnified variety.

Finbar proposed that friends of his, a long deceased travelling showband – the former Leprechauns of Tralee, now the Dead Leprechauns of Tralee – should put on a humdinger of a show to distract the students, while the job of correcting the blip on transmuting and retrieving the Addendum was completed, hopefully without any complications.

"Absolute poppycock!" snorted Creek after hearing of Professor Winch's proposals.

Josh smiled grimly. He actually felt the same as Ezekiel Creek, but wouldn't deliberately challenge Professor Winch, but still, he had to say something.

"Do you really think this could work, Professor?" asked Josh.

"The honest truth is, I just don't know, but it's the best I, or rather, Finbar, can come up with under the circumstances. Unless either of you can come up with anything better at this late hour, then we'll have to give it a go," replied

Professor Winch.

Both realised the desperate reality and neither could come up with anything better. Ezekiel Creek was worried over how he could possibly perform such powerful spells in the middle of the most bizarre concert he'd ever heard of.

After a few moments thought Josh decided it was definitely worth a go, even if it failed. So did Ezekiel Creek, eventually. He nodded his head, slightly, to indicate his reluctant agreement.

Finbar O'Reilly smiled.

"Deal! Done, done – and dusted!" proclaimed Finbar, spitting on his hand and holding it out to the others to seal the deal.

"Er – true gentlemen don't need to shake hands, Finbar," said the diplomatic Professor Winch, while Ezekiel pondered on the wonder of certain ghosts whose very beings were solid rather than stylised gas, while Josh just smiled awkwardly.

"G'night to all 'ere!" said Finbar. He hovered back out of the office and disappeared into the night from whence he came.

"What's next, Professor?" asked Josh.

Josh didn't see it, but Ezekiel Creek gave a wicked little smile upon hearing this. Professor Winch went red, then white – and then looked down as he spoke.

"Er – Josh, I think it's time to explain your travelling arrangements," mumbled the professor.

"What do you mean, Headmaster?" asked Josh.

"By bringing you here and interfering with a transmutation, I have voided your original journey. Unfortunately, you cannot carry on the transmutation from here, but unless you complete the circuit somehow, you will not be able to return to Krickenstaltz again, that is not something I am going to consider for one second. Add to this, Professor Zenith's Blocking spells on most forms of magic travel which leaves you both no option but to make a journey to Aberystwyth, but by – er – other means.

"Now – er – Josh, as you know, there are no trains, buses or taxis operating at present, due to the strike, but I think – er – we've found a solution."

At this point, Ezekiel Creek was grinning once more, and Professor Winch gave a big sigh. Creek turned to Josh. "Do you have one of these, Beecham? No, I didn't think so," Ezekiel Creek was holding a driving licence.

Josh first of all shook his head in disbelief, but then put his head down in despair. The last thing he wanted was a long car journey with Ezekiel Creek, with a stray wolf-whale maybe, or even Professor Zenith – but not Ezekiel Creek.

Professor Winch ignored this further show of unwillingness.

"Well then, as the show doesn't start until this evening and as getting there too early could compromise your security, it's best if you rest now and set off this afternoon. And I think that concludes our little chat, almost. Thank you,

Josh, I knew I could count on you, old friend. And rest assured, one day your Aunt Hattie will understand, I promise.

"Now, Ezekiel, I would like you to stay awhile, if you would, please."

"Certainly, Headmaster, as you wish," replied Ezekiel Creek.

Josh Beecham left Professor Winch's office, musing on what the next couple of days would bring. He was also wondering what Professor Winch had to say to Ezekiel Creek that could not be said in front of him – so was Ezekiel Creek.

31

More Revelations for Ezekiel Creek

PROFESSOR WINCH smiled and once again bade Professor Ezekiel Creek to sit down.

"Are you sure you won't have some brandy, Ezekiel?"

"Absolutely certain, Headmaster." He was not smiling. He also noticed that Professor Winch had one hand behind his chair. Ezekiel Creek assumed that it was arthritis or rheumatics and that it was the only way to ease the pain. Although Professor Winch was in fine fettle, he did have the fingers of his left hand crossed; at various points in the conversation he would uncross them, and at other times cross them again.

"Ezekiel, as our last meeting came to – er – an abrupt end, I am taking the opportunity of the slight lull in proceedings to tell you the rest of what I believe you should know. I have to make sure that both you and Josh know all of the relevant facts. Josh has already been told of this, but did I get as far as telling you that the Book of Chaotagens was missing a page, and had been all the time it was in our possession? More importantly that the Addendum you are going to retrieve from Aberystwyth is one and the same?"

"No, Headmaster you did not! But how could you know this if you have never read the book?"

"Er – how did I know? Er – well – it was none other than our old friend Merlin. He was so desperate and still is for all I know, to have his health and strength restored, that he surrendered this information freely without any undue pressure from Aloysius. It would appear that this missing page, or Addendum, gave the location of the Chaotagen Wand, but Merlin said it was lost while he was evading recapture, somewhere on Merseyside.

"I believe that this missing page was found about ten years ago by the very same thieves and murderers, who, only days ago stole the wand and killed the Archaeologists. Thanks to Vlad the Impala it is now back in our hands . . . almost. . . "

"How did Vlad manage to retrieve it?"

"By accident, really. Vlad's homeland was attacked yesterday by these brigands, who obviously thought it would be a pushover, but they met their match both militarily and magically, and in the ensuing rout part of the booty of the battle was a leather case containing the Addendum. It was handed to Vlad by one of his corporals who knew it would be important to us – and so he transmuted the Addendum back to the library."

Ezekiel Creek was not convinced of the usefulness of such a retrieval. "But we know that these brigands, whoever they are, managed to read its contents and locate the wand. What possible use is such an Addendum to us

now? The cat's out the bag."

"The cat, but not the cattery, so to speak!"

"Pardon, Headmaster?!"

"At the bottom of the page is a spell which will render the wand useless, but it is written in a dead language that even Merlin has unfortunately forgotten and will have been meaningless to the warlocks. However, if we can decipher this writing we can make the wand totally harmless. This also means that even if the location of Krickenstaltz is compromised, the Chaotagens cannot be released."

"Yes, yes, of course, I can see now, but I am still confused about many things, Headmaster, very confused. Who are these brigands, exactly? And what about this gap of ten years?"

Professor Winch's face softened. His countenance was now that of sorrow and compassion.

"Ezekiel, my old friend, prepare yourself for a shock: the band of brigands in question, are none other than . . . the Warlocks of Bucharest. . ."

Creek's face went ashen, his eyes hardened, and his hands tightly gripped the arms of his chair. Although the body of Ezekiel Creek was still in Professor Winch's office, his thoughts were not. His mind was back in some dark dungeon carved out of solid rock, in one of the mountains that surrounded the Krickenstaltz Academy. . .

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It was many years ago, and Ezekiel Creek had yet to take up a commission in the WSS, but he was the youngest and most courageous corporal in the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment, a more rustic branch of the WFW's armed forces.

Although the magic of Krickenstaltz was very powerful, the WFW did not take any chances with enemies who gathered nearby. The Warlocks of Bucharest, proud of their evil reputation as being merciless, brutal killers of the innocent, had indeed gathered only a short distance from Krickenstaltz. They were unaware of the Academy's exact location but had heard rumours of its existence. Their reign of terror inflicted upon the innocent peasant folk of the region spurred the WFW to come to their defence, and to bolster a determined but ill-equipped band of local volunteers. The Cavalry, Ezekiel Creek included, fought bravely against overwhelming odds. Each and every Cavalryman swore an oath that they would not use magic to fight these brigands. The magic of Krickenstaltz, inherent in its citizens and warriors could not be compromised at any price; such use of magic in battle could weaken the magic forces keeping the Academy invisible. This was despite the warlocks embellishing their brilliant but evil swordsmanship with spells and weaponry that blinded, maimed, and drove many mad.

Those afflicted with the most evil of their weapons, strayed from the field of battle, screaming, no longer knowing where they were.

Ezekiel Creek had survived many battles against them, but on this occasion his troop had been reduced to just one private and himself. They had to try

and stop the warlocks from entering the village of Volencolvik until more of their comrades arrived – then the villagers would be safe. Ezekiel Creek and his comrade fought bravely, defending a narrow gateway, this was the only way the warlocks could enter the village. Luckily for the villagers the threat of airborne attacks was negated by the village being situated entirely within the shadow of a huge rock precipice dating from the precambrian era, jutting out and sweeping down to not much more than house level.

The warlocks' swords rained down on the two heroes, bolts of blue lightning shot out from their battle-wands, but they fought on. The leader of the warlocks, Kerantzky, threw his hatchet at Private Arnie Ojstott. It went straight into his heart and he slumped, dead, over one of the crosspieces of the gateway. Creek and the besieged villagers then heard shouts and a thundery rumbling sound from about a hundred yards away. It was the rest of the Cavalry Regiment, but it was too late for Creek. Kerantzky smashed the flat of his broadsword down onto Ezekiel Creek's head. He now lay on the ground, unconscious and badly bleeding.

"Iv 'e'z still breezing, bring him! Ve'll 'ave zum fun viz ziss one."

Kerantzky gave the order to retreat, and the warlocks rode away to their mountain hide-out.

Ezekiel Creek awoke to find himself tied to a barrel. He was somewhere dark, damp and smelly. It was the warlocks' cave, deep in the mountainside.

"Zo! Ze brave corporal iz still viz us? Vell, Corporal, you vill die today, get used to zat – but if you vish to die qvicker, zen co-operate. I vish – no, zat iz not right, I *VILL* find out ver ziss myzteriuz Krickenstaltz iz. You, Corporal, vill tell me." With that, he lunged at him with his sword, plunging it right into his left leg. Ezekiel Creek screamed in absolute agony. "Oh, by ze vay, zer iz vorse to come, much vorse. Magick or ze sword – no bozzer to me or my men, but I vill find out."

Ezekiel Creek spat blood from his mouth. "Even if I die a thousand agonising deaths, you will never get anything from me. Never!" He spat out more blood, directly at Kerantzky.

"Oh, iz zat zo, zat zo," said Kerantzky, who wiped away the blood, removed the sword and walked around the cave in some sort of triumphal ritual, grinning at all of his men.

Ezekiel Creek looked around him. There were about thirty men all dressed in rough black leather tunics, with huge belts and gold buckles around their generous wastes. All were unshaven, and all were very dirty, with very long, tatty, unkempt and unwashed hair.

They were all eating what looked like huge chicken legs as they jeered at Creek, and encouraged their leader to inflict more pain and humiliation upon him.

One other thing Ezekiel Creek noticed – something very peculiar. On the forehead of each and every warlock were some kind of markings – purplish in colour, a design of some sort, but Ezekiel Creek couldn't quite work out what it was.

Ezekiel Creek mused no longer over such a triviality, not when he was facing certain death.

"You vill not like ziss, my friend. Stop me anytime. Tell me vot I vont – and zen I vill just kill you – kazumph! Gone!" crowed Kerantzky. He went over to a huge cauldron which was hissing and spitting green flames. He held his bloodied sword over it and began to invoke some dark, evil magic.

Most of it was unintelligible to Creek, but he could hear clearly the last and probably most terrible part of the spell.

'AGONATUM EXCRUTIATO ETERNUM! DEMENTO SENSICUS FERMENTIM!'

Kerantzky lowered his sword into the writhing, seething concoction. The cauldron hissed and bubbled louder as yellow and orange sparks flew out. At the same time, the whole cave rumbled and pieces of rock fell from the cave walls. The sword was now blood-red, apart from the tip which glowed a bright yellow. Kerantzky lifted the sword high into the air, walked over to Ezekiel Creek, and slowly pushed the sword into his shoulder blade. Ezekiel gave out one piercing scream after another. The screams were so loud that they echoed, the cave vibrated, and again parts of the cave wall fell away.

The warlocks in the cave or on guard outside, or even scattered around the mountainside, had to cover their ears – but not Kerantzky. With Ezekiel Creek still in indescribable agony, Kerantzky manoeuvred the sword around to the top of his arm, pushed it in deeper, and slowly moved it downwards. Ezekiel let out another succession of piercing blood-curdling screams.

"Ziss iz very powerful magick – it vill prolong your agony. Die? No, no, not yet. I've only just begun. VER IZ KRICKENSTALTZ?! 'OW DO I GET ZER?!"

But Kerantzky was then disturbed by shouts from outside.

The rest of the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment had, although more by luck than judgement, tracked the warlocks to their camp.

There then ensued absolute chaos, both in the cave where Ezekiel Creek and his captors were, and many other caves in and around the mountainside. Kerantzky didn't wait to hear any enlightenment from Creek; he and his chosen few fled down a secret passageway running deeper into the mountain, and to freedom. The fate of the rest of his men was somewhat different.

Many of the cavalry spread out to cover most routes down off the mountain. Many more dismounted and went to take on the warlocks who seemed most likely to be guarding their prize, but more importantly to the cavalry, their friend and corporal, Ezekiel Creek.

One of the cavalrymen drew his sword and entered one of the caves. He very quickly came back to the cave entrance.

"Quick! In here! Ezekiel is in here! Quickly, he's close to death!" shouted the private over to the troop's medical orderly. Who should dismount and hurry into the cave to attend to Ezekiel Creek, but dear old Trixie Beecham, later to become Mrs Gripweed. At this time in her life she was Corporal

Beecham of the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Medical Corp.

"My my, you're in a right old mess and no mistake, aren't you? Where's my things? Ah, yes, drink this, Ezekiel, this will restore your blood vessels. Now, where's my restoring jelly? Good! Got it! Hold still, Ezekiel, there's a chappy."

Ezekiel Creek felt the searing pain slowly ease, but the magic medicine used was also a sleeping draught, and he was soon out cold and being carried on a stretcher and away back to Krickenstaltz. There he would benefit from Emergency Reversal spells to undo the evil work of Kerantzky.

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"Ezekiel! Ezekiel! Are you all right?! Zeke, old chap!" It was Professor Winch.

Creek's mind gradually returned to his body. Finally he was able to focus and looked across to see the worried look on the face of his old friend.

"Sorry about that, Headmaster, just the mention of their name and I think I'm back there again, I'm all right now, though. So it's the warlocks who have got the Chaotagen Wand? Very sinister. You were saying something about ten years ago. . . ?"

"Yes, Ezekiel, I believe they found the missing page, the Addendum, long before now, ten years ago or thereabouts."

"You've got me there, Headmaster. How do you know it's ten years ago? Even if it was, why wait ten years to go and fetch the wand?"

"Because, Ezekiel, old chap, it meant nothing to them at that time, or so I believe. There is – or rather was – nothing in the history of the Warlocks of Bucharest to suggest that they knew as much of Trevelyan's book as we did. However, they have obviously learned something of it since – very recently in fact, straight after the Book of Chaotagens was stolen. However, something else has happened which makes me certain it was indeed the Warlocks of Bucharest."

"And what on earth would that be, Headmaster?"

"It actually concerns none other than our good friend Daphne. She and I were in Somerset a few weeks ago. I had strong suspicions of sinister activities by someone, but could not be sure of who exactly. I had to go and see if I could find out more, and I asked Daphne to help me.

"Not long after arriving and booking in we left our hotel again to commence our investigations, but moments later, Daphne suddenly felt very weak. She put her hand to her head and rushed straight back to her room. It was then I remembered something.

"I recalled that exactly the same thing had happened about ten years before. Although I initially wrote it off as being coincidence, still, something niggled away in the back of my mind, but then thngs began to click. On the first occasion, her sickness had occurred at exactly the same time as a confirmed warlock raid, in Thornton, near Liverpool. At the time, Daphne and I were one mile up the road, in Crosby. Ergo, when Daphne was ill this time round, I knew it could be no coincidence. The Warlocks, most probably the Bucharest brigade, were in Somerset."

"But what has Daphne Llefevre being ill got to do with the Warlocks of Bucharest being in the vicinity?"

"The Mark of Warlock."

"And what on earth is that, Headmaster?"

"The Mark of Warlock is a sign that every Warlock has. It appears as a small coat of arms, usually on the forehead and mostly purple in colour. It's shaped like a cauldron with a python wrapped around it, and a bloodied sword and battle-wands, criss-crossing."

"Headmaster! I have seen this before! I remember seeing such a mark when I was being tortured! Are you telling me that Daphne Llefevre has this mark and that she is a warlock?!"

"Yes, Ezekiel, Daphne Llefevre has the Mark of Warlock, and yes, she is indeed a warlock."

"But I have known Daphne for many years, Headmaster! How is it I did not know this already? How is it I have not seen this mark upon her?"

"Because the mark is only visible when in the company of other warlocks. If there are great distances between any two or more warlocks the mark will not appear, but when it appears again after a long time it causes great pain, so Daphne was not just trying to hide the mark, she was indeed ill. For the mark to have appeared on Daphne's forehead could only have meant that other warlocks were near."

"But are you sure, Headmaster?! You said that Daphne ran back to her room. How do you know for sure?!" asked the demented Ezekiel.

"Because, as I said, I suspected the truth. I followed her back to her hotel room, by which time she had a towel over her head, and saying she had a migraine. Although I seemed ungentlemanly I had to know for sure and just whipped the towel off her head, and there it was. Daphne screamed for me to get out, which I did, but later on when she felt a bit better, which probably meant that the warlocks had departed, I coaxed her to talk to me. It turned out that she was the last surviving female warlock in the British Isles."

"Well well well! Daphne Llefevre is actually one of the murdering scum who nearly killed me! Well done, Headmaster! And to think we've been good friends all these years! The sheer audacity of the woman! So that's it then, what time do we tell the boys to come and get her?"

"Never, Ezekiel. You still don't understand. I never said Daphne was one of the Warlocks of Bucharest, I said she was a warlock. It is only the evil deeds of the Warlocks of Bucharest which have given warlocks a bad name. In the main, they are, or rather used to be, a proud warrior race who fought for the underprivileged, a bit like Arthur, or even Green Robbo and his jolly lads, only the warlocks were predominantly from the east. There were some who settled here and Daphne is a descendant of these."

Ezekiel just sat there shaking his head, he didn't know what to believe.

Professor Winch sighed. He felt sorry for his friend but was unsure how to convince him that Daphne was innocent.

"Look, Zeke, we have other important points to cover, but please try and understand this: just being a warlock is not an automatic sign that a person is evil. Daphne is a good lady and has been a good friend to us and to all of our community for many years. Try and remember, then, that every warlock, good or bad, does indeed carry the Mark of Warlock."

"Yes, Headmaster, you are right as usual," sighed Ezekiel, and feeling very sorry he had doubted the true allegiance of a good friend.

"Good, good, let's crack on. So, by deduction, we can safely assume that the Warlocks of Bucharest are indeed behind the theft of the wand and the murder of the archaeologists. And here's the absolute clincher – it is not what was done then, but what has not been done until now. The warlocks must have quickly realised that the wand was useless on its own. They did not even attempt to retrieve it until recently. Why? Because it is only recently that they, as well as Zenith and his cohorts, have found any use for it, in other words, to bring the book and the wand together."

"Yes, I thought you were going to say that, but are you certain that it was Professor Zenith who has stolen the Book of Chaotagens? How did he manage that if he has been stuck in Romania all this time?" asked a puzzled Professor Creek.

"Good question," replied Professor Winch, "but I do believe I have the answer. Quite often when we say Zenith has done this or that, we actually mean that one of his followers – The League of Mordred if you will, has carried out a particular act or brought about some situation in his name. Considering all that has gone on, I strongly believe that a member of The League of Mordred found out that the book was being held in our library at the university, and when he had the chance, stole it, and made his way over to Romania to present it to his evil master."

"Yes, Headmaster, that makes sense, smart bit of work that. How on earth did he manage to steal it right from under our noses?"

"It's quite simple really, brilliant, but simple. I believe that the book was stolen by someone in a position of trust. I believe there is a spy in our camp, most probably at the university, more accurately, the university library."

"A spy? At the library? Surely not, Headmaster! I thought the library, as well as the whole of Abracadrystwyth, was as safe as Krickenstaltz!" exclaimed Professor Creek.

"So did I, Ezekiel, so did I, but nevertheless, a spy is in our midst. Moreover, I am certain that the spy is acting as a go-between, bringing all the components together: Professor Zenith, the warlocks, the book and the wand. The only reason that the warlocks have not yet teamed up with Professor Zenith, is that our good friend and ally, Vlad the Impala, has put up a Magic-Reflector screen around the general area where the enemy is believed to be. If we're lucky, this will have transported the warlocks to Siberia, but they will not be fooled twice. Upon returning to Romania they will no doubt try to use their own magic to finally reach Professor Zenith. If this happens, thus bringing all of the evil components together, then we've

had it, all of us.

"Ezekiel, you have been a patient listener, thank you. However, you have one other task tomorrow. Straight after securing the Addendum, do not entrust it to Forgetful Jones again – for obvious reasons – but keep it safe, and then commence rooting out this spy. I am not telling Josh, not because I don't trust him, but because it is best to only let one person in on things from the start, but he is to be allowed to help at every step. Do you agree?"

"Yes, of course, Headmaster. I give you my solemn promise that I will no longer let my personal feelings towards Beecham get in the way of what I have to do. Equally, I am glad that my momentary beliefs about Daphne were totally wrong."

"I knew you would say that, thank you. Now try and get some rest for what's left of the night."

Ezekiel Creek smiled to himself after saying good night to Professor Winch. The birds were singing, the sun was blazing in through the window, and the gardener was merrily whistling away as he trundled across the lawn.

32

The Frequency Modulator

" . . . THE SECONDS ARE TICKING AWAY as Mike Miller rolls the ball out to Matheson . . . they've done unbelievably well, John, but it's all over for them now, surely. . . ?"

"Yeah, I would say so, John. Nothing bar a miracle can save them now . . . hello! What's this?! Matheson passes back to Miller, who immediately hoofs the ball up the pitch. Miller's left his goal and is running up to strengthen the attack! Egglington forces a corner. Mike joins his two bemused strikers. In comes the ball – Miller goes up – a deft flick of the head, and. . . "

There was a knock on the door which caused Mike to wake with a start and ruin the best dream he had ever had, or would have had if he had slept on. His beloved Bedazzlers had been drafted in to replace England in the World Cup, after the squad had been decimated by Swine Flu'.

They were one-zero down to Brazil (the real Brazil), with thirty seconds of the game remaining. Brazil had only managed to score because Mike had had to desert his goalkeeping duties to save the England manager from a rampaging dragon.

Mike rubbed his eyes and groaned. In his startled state he could not decide between, "Who is it?" and, "Come in." It came out, "Who's in?"

"You, ya daft sod," came the reply. The voice was a male voice but a young male voice, which was odd, as apart from the siblings and Ellen and Ernst (ish), all the folks Mike had met since his arrival at Krickenstaltz seemed older, and some really, really old.

"Sorry, come in, the doors open."

The door opened. In walked a tall, gawky looking pimply youth in plain white robes. He was holding a small, wavy shaped wooden box.

"Maint'nance. Boss says 'ere's yer radio."

"Radio? A real radio like I've got at home?"

The youth closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "Ommmmm-mmmmmmmm," he droned, then he stopped and opened his eyes. "No idea. Wannit or not?"

Mike chuckled. "Yeah, of course, ta."

"Huh! Kids!" muttered the not much more than a kid himself as he turned round and left to go back to his more usual mind-numbing duty of sitting watching the dial of the Central Magic Time Modulator. The task is so dull that on his very first day in the job he just sat and watched and watched and watched. He began to drool from his mouth like a hungry dog and his eyes became very red. Instead of making the expected adjustments he just continued to stare and drool as the needle sped up and moved from the

green portion on the far left of the digital semi-circle, set within a luminous orange background on the console screen, over to the blue central section, and then carried on and into the red section on the far right. This had the result of generating some useful information which appeared below the indicator in large flashing red letters —

'Emergency. End of world looming!
Vacate this world now!'

It was only through sheer luck that Ren Stannich had turned up to delegate one of the ad hoc tasks that was part of the maintenance team's duties. He saw the entranced Hank Hubble, glanced at the dial, jumped back and yelped, and then took the corrective action needed to neutralize the problem.

Mike took the radio and placed it on the little table, relegating the bowl of the delightful, natural and freezing cold waters to the floor.

Mike took a look at his new gizmo.

It was 1940s in style, teak effect with a rounded look, art deco in fact, but Mike did not know that. The radio did not have either a separate volume control or a station finder; all there was, was one small plastic knob which acted as the on/off switch and the volume, which left Mike to conclude that it could only receive one station.

Mike was also curious as to why the rules concerning the use of energy, magic or otherwise, had been relaxed.

"Is this a magic radio or not?" Mike said to himself. He turned the knob, got a feel for what was loud and what was not, and jumped back on his bed so he could listen to. . .

" . . . With your host and friend, Murgatroyd Plantagenet. And we now go over to Somerset, to that great bastion of hope for our community, the Citadel of Glastonbury. Are you there, Nobby. . .?"

"Thanks, Murgatroyd. Hello there, everyone, Nobby Wickerman here. I'm pleased to say it's a good turn out today, the town square is jam packed despite the rain, and I think we're all ready . . . Three! Two! One. . . !"

A totally mystified Mike listened on, but instead of something of great magnitude filling the air waves, all went dead, but not for long. . .

"And there you have it. It's a shame you couldn't see this, folks, it was short and sharp but friendly rather than formal, just what we wanted. OK, back to you, Murgatroyd . . . "

"Thanks, Nobby. Now, who's next? Ah, yes, Tasha Sedwidge in Preston. Take it away, Tash!"

"Thanks, Murg', and a big hello to all you listeners of Short Wave Radio. Yes, just got the nod from the Mayor, we're all ready, and . . . there! Done! I'm sorry to gloat, but I think we outdid Nobby there, as the whole town agreed to dedicate theirs to all absent friends and loved ones. Nice, eh? Back to you, Murgatroyd. . . "

Mike was still none the wiser. He shook his head and chuckled. The magic world obviously had a very different idea as to what constituted good radio, but he listened on, wondering if all would become clear at some point.

"Jud in Barnswick, are you there. . . ?" (Mike sat bolt upright).

"Yes, Murgs – here. Now, we are going to do things a little differently here, as our wave is dedicated to a proud son of Barnswick. . . (Mike's heart missed a beat). " . . . His life as we know, changed forever at just eleven years of age. . . (Mike was almost having palpitations). " . . . Taken away from his beloved footy, his family, things could never be the same again from then on. So, ready everyone? Make it a good'un. Let's show Bert Thewlis that we will always remember him. . . (Mike let out air as if someone had stuck a pin in him) . . . Ready? A-Three! A-Two! A-One!"

This time there wasn't silence, but what sound there was, was short and sharp and which stopped no sooner than it had started. Mike thought it was going to be one of those community cheers where the choice of different words made it sort of vague, but where 'Hooray!' was still the predominant choice, just about drowning out the 'Yeeahs!' and the 'Yippees!' and on some occasions, the rather novel, 'Gerrin there, me little beauty!' But this was over in a split-second.

Instead of the roving reporter handing back to the studio, a jingle was now played. . .

'Whether rain or snow, for June or Joe!
It's Short Wave Radio!'

"I don't believe it!' yelled Mike to himself. "The idiots!" The penny had finally dropped.

It was obvious now that whoever it was from the magic community that had invented this very strange magic version of a perfectly non-magic medium, had made the tragic yet hilarious gaff of thinking that short wave was literally that, people waving – but not for long.

"What a load of garbage!" said Mike, but still chuckling as he switched his short wave radio off. There was another knock on the door.

"Who is it?" said Mike.

"Maint'nance," came the dull flat reply.

"Again?!"

"Maint'nance," came the dull flat reply.

"No, I mean . . . come in, come in," said Mike.

The door opened and Hank Hubble walked in, and was once more carrying a small wooden box. "Been a mistake, should 'a' 'anded out this one instead," said Hank.

"Oh, right, what is it this time? Long wave?" joked Mike.

"Yes," replied Hank, who wasn't.

"Blimey," said Mike to himself. "Thanks anyway."

He took the radio off Hank, gave him the first one back, and Hank walked off to return once more to his module watching.

Mike had already decided to leave his new gizmo, whether it was short wave, long wave or any wave, switched off and left in the corner never to be switched on again, and go off to find the siblings. But he just couldn't resist it. He placed the new radio on his bed and switched it on. . .

"Ethelred, are you there? Sorry, folks, he's not ready, mind you, that figures. Never mind, let's try Ann-Marie Internazzo. Ann-Marie?"

"Yes, here, Murgatroyd. I am in the quaint village of Saint Axl of the Roses. There's about two-hundred of us gathered in the High Street . . . I think we're ready . . . Annnnddd done! Back to you."

Mike noted the slightly longer time it took to complete the proceedings, shook his head, and switched the radio off. He was about to finally go off to look for Vincent and Juliette when there was another knock on the door.

"Not again!" exclaimed Mike.

"Er – it's us," said Vincent, "can we come in?"

"Yeah, yeah, sorry . . . come in, it's open. Thought you were the pimply lad with a new stereo or something."

Vincent and Juliette walked in, and straightaway Juliette noticed the radio.

"You got one, too?"

"Yep, what a load of rubbish. Whose bright idea was that?" replied Mike.

"Yeah, it is crap," said Vincent, while Juliette just smiled. "Dad's up in arms over it. Says if we're going to rip off non-magic stuff we should at least get it right. Trouble is, he can't just overrule other departments without good reason, and if they know there's some excess energy up for grabs, then apparently they can demand that their stuff gets given a chance at least. It's not all bad, most new things are OK, but sometimes it's rubbish."

"Excess energy?" mused Mike. "So that's how the radio was allowed in here?"

"That's right, Mike," said Juliette, "as long as Father and Ernst are certain that the inherent magic of the place will not be affected, and with controlled excess energy that's usually the case, then we can have some new things, but they only last as long as the energy lasts. Once that's gone, whatever has been formulated just disappears."

"Ah, I see . . . I think," said Mike, who at least now had some idea however minimal, as to why even the most strictest of magic laws can occasionally be broken. "So, what shall we do today?" he then asked of the siblings.

"Dunno, Mike, sorry," said Vincent.

"My room? I've got lemo and jelly babies. Ellen dropped them in yesterday," suggested Juliette.

"Sounds good to me," said Mike, "let's go then."

But there was yet another knock on the door.

"Who's there?" jumped in Vincent, not giving Mike a chance.

"Maint'nance."

"Maintenance who?" said Vincent, and very quickly at that to ensure Mike still remained speechless.

"Haa de haa haa," came the voice of Hank Hubble. "Should 'a' guessed you'd be 'ere."

"It's open, come in," interjected Mike.

Hank Hubble once more came in bearing a gift.

"What is it this time? FM? Digital?" Mike said, which made the siblings grin.

"Digital," came the monotonic reply, but Hank's mouth and face flickered ever so slightly.

"Really? So what do they do on that then? Talk all day about numbers? Or about people's toes?"

"Both," said deadpan Hank, while Vincent and Juliette had to really work hard to prevent themselves from collapsing in an attack of manic laughter.

"OK, thanks," said Mike, who knew that he had best show some decorum. He once again swapped radios with Hank, waited for him to disappear down the corridor, and then flung the new radio into a corner. It landed with a crunching, splintering sound. "Coming?" said Mike, now almost out of the door. As the three friends made the short journey to Juliette's room. . .

"At last! After some embarrassing false starts we've finally cracked it – we hope! Welcome to all of you good folks in magic radio land – to our brand new station! Krickenstaltz FM Radio! And now, who better to start our brand new station off with, than . . . !"

The oh-so familiar opening bars of a famous song by the Beatles filled Mike's room, followed by. . .

'Well, shake it up, Baby, now! ('Shake it up, Baby!') Twist and Shout. . . !'

The thumping classic even filled the corridors of the spartan citadel, but not for long. All went totally dead as the damage caused by Mike to the magic radio valves finally kicked in.

"Serves 'em right, the cheeky monkeys," said Hank Hubble with a smug smile.

33

The Forger and his Gofer

JOSH slept only in fits and starts.

He rose early and went for a walk around Hemlock Village.

Firstly, he called into The Greasy Gremlin. This was a simple roadside café, clean despite its name, and which served heaps of good, cheap food, mostly to long distance broomstick riders, and quite often Josh as well.

The customers looked up from their early morning fry-ups and mugs of hot steaming tea and smiled upon seeing their old friend, but Josh changed his mind about breakfast and walked out again. Not only did being with Ezekiel Creek make him feel sick to the stomach, thinking about how it made him feel sick to the stomach, made him feel sick to the stomach.

Although it would mean failing to fulfil a promise he had made to his Aunt Hattie, which was to look after the shop while she went off to an appointment with her psychic consultant, a German/Russian lady of great repute, Josh again walked around the village. He then ambled across the fields, around Shadowbrooke Farm, and then finally although very reluctantly, strolled, very slowly, back to the shop.

"Oh I see! Decided to come back when it suits you, eh?!" yelled his highly disgruntled Aunt Hattie. "Well, my lad! If you think I'm shifting them crates on my own, then you have another think coming! And if Frau Dulentripoff didn't already know I was going to be late, you'd get belted into next week with me brolly!"

Josh dreaded these rows. For many years he had not been able to be entirely honest with his Aunt Hattie about his mysterious trips abroad while working for the WSS. Even after finally returning home after four years, his longest ever absence, it had not taken long before his Aunt Hattie had made his life an absolute misery, believing him to be in with a gang of villains who would be the death of him, and her. He loved her dearly, and on more than one occasion had nearly broken down and told her the truth, but he knew that by doing this it would, or at least could do more harm than good, not only to their own little magic community of Hemlock Village, but to all good folk the whole world over.

Yet again a judicious lie had to be the order of the day.

"This afternoon, Auntie, I promise. How about a little bit of lunch off me old Aunt Hattie, eh?"

His aunt smiled, and hugged her prodigal nephew.

"Josh Beecham, you are the biggest rascal this family has ever had the misfortune to be lumbered with, but your Aunt Hattie loves the bones of you just the same."

She blubbered all over her nephew's jacket. What she did not know was that her nephew was fighting back the tears himself.

"Are you ready, Beecham?" said Ezekiel Creek.

Josh had struggled with his lunch, fetched his coat and cigarettes and was standing in the hallway before the entrance of the school. He had actually given up smoking cigarettes years ago, but the stress he was under made him bring his emergency packet along.

"Yes, ready."

"Let's go, then. And don't even think about lighting up one of those things in my car, the daftest things ever invented."

"For once, I quite agree. . . " replied Josh in a nonchalant manner.

Ezekiel Creek went round to an old shed where he kept his old Zephyr Zodiac. He had watched the TV police drama, *'Z Cars'*, many years ago, and had become obsessed with the patrol cars used in the show, Zephyr Zodiacs. The early models had all been very round in form with the front seats just one long upholstered bench. Over time they had become more angular, quite a spacey design in fact. This was Creek's favourite, and when he had finally saved up enough money he had bought one for himself and had lovingly cared for it, sort of, ever since.

The car could be heard loud and clear before it was seen. Ezekiel Creek had done a good job on the bodywork, but he had not taken as much care with the engine as he might have done. It sprang into life with a roar, then a splutter, then nothing, and then back to life again. This time it shot forward, stalled, and then sprang and leapt forward a few feet more with black smoke belching from the exhaust. Unfortunately, this was in full view of Miss Llefevre's cadets' class, moved hastily to outside the main school a year previously, after several of the more enthusiastic students had blown holes in the wall with their trainee battle-wands. They gave up imagining they were being stalked by dark enemies, and instead cheered and jeered at each kangaroo hop due to the engine repeatedly stalling.

What was worse for Professor Creek was that Josh Beecham had also joined in the jeering.

"Beecham! Stop wasting time! Get in here will you! Now!"

A smiling Josh Beecham got in the front passenger seat. To further stalling followed by more loud jeers, the car roared off down the road. Roared only really covered the noise. Its top speed due to its small engine and Creek's amateur tinkering, was an underwhelming forty-eight miles per hour, and it took about three hours to reach maximum. Along the lane going away from school, it just about managed eighteen miles per hour.

Soon they were out of sight of the jeering students and were on the main road. Ezekiel Creek turned to Josh. "I see you are dressed for the part," he sneered.

Although Josh had done his best to dress appropriately, the best he could come up with was a badly creased check shirt, a black donkey jacket, equally

badly creased navy blue trousers and a pair of size twelve boots. His earlier yomping over the fields had made things even worse by his also being covered in dried mud.

"I see you have as well," finally retorted Josh. Ezekiel Creek was wearing his alter ego clothing. Smart black trousers, a pristine sharply creased white shirt, a sickly looking floral patterned tie, a pinstripe jacket and sporting a pair of highly polished brogues. To be fair to Ezekiel Creek, he was dressed well. He could pass for anything from a teacher or even a professor or a bank manager, or any occupation where it would be normal to be quite well attired.

"You could have made an effort, Beecham. We may have to come into contact with ordinary folk for one reason and another and I don't want you ruining things. You look like an out of work road mender who's on the run!"

"Next time the boss scoops me out of a transmutation, I'll have my Sunday best with me! OK?!"

"That's no excuse and you know it! You are in the WFW, man! You've got to think ahead! Be prepared!"

"Dib dib dib!" retorted tenderfoot Beecham.

But Professor Ezekiel Creek was right. Josh could easily make provision for such situations, but somehow he never got round to it. Josh decided to say nothing more on the subject in the hope that Ezekiel Creek would do the same.

After an hour or so of complete silence, Creek turned to Josh. "How much funny money do you have on you?"

"Enough. Why?" replied Josh who actually thought it was rather impertinent, and more importantly, hoped it was not for Ezekiel Creek to suggest that they stop at a clothes shop. Thankfully it wasn't.

"For petrol and food, I'm blowed if I'm paying for everything. I'll fill the tank, you pay for a meal. Agreed?"

"That's fine by me."

And those were the last words they spoke to each other for hours. They were well past Hemlock Hall and out on the open road. Josh decided to do nothing but stare out of the windows for the entire journey; he was equally sure that Ezekiel Creek would agree with this course of action.

However, one consolation for both of them as they drove along A and B roads and even the odd country lane that doesn't merit such classification, was that they were in the Cotswolds. They could take in the scenes of rural delight: rolling pastures, gentle valleys, forests, villages, canals, barges and boats, country pubs – and of course, the mighty River Severn.

Josh was glad of such diversions, and he was glad of the warm September day as he wound down the window to feel the breeze and get cold again.

'How silly we all are,' mused Josh.

The car sped further and further away from their familiar territory and onwards towards Wales. They were about half way when they turned down a little slip road that led to a small transport café, which also had one petrol

pump. They pulled up just outside.

"I'll fill up, you go in and order. I'll have steak and chips and coffee. Remember, no magic talk, no Hemlock Hall – or anything of our world. Understand?!" demanded Creek.

"OK OK!" retorted Josh, sharply. "I'm not stupid!" which was the worst thing Josh could have said, as that gave Ezekiel Creek an excuse to curl his lip and give one of his oh-so superior sneers, as if to say, 'Oh yes you are, mate!'

Josh Beecham walked in through the single door to the café. He looked at the tables, the bar, and then at the till area. He saw a waiter taking an order from the only other customer, and realised it was table service. Josh sat at a table for two at the far side of the cafe. Eventually, the same waiter he had seen, in fact the proprietor, appeared with a tea-towel over his arm and holding a note pad.

"Good afternoon, sir, what can I get you?"

Josh ordered steak and chips twice, one coffee, and one two-litre glass of expensive lager. Ezekiel Creek may be driving but he wasn't, and boy, was he going to remind him of that fact.

Ezekiel Creek came in and sat next to Josh.

The pair received some funny looks off the proprietor; he thought as to why an Oxbridge Don type character would be on a journey with someone who looked as if he'd just finished a shift building the new motorway. Still, as long as they paid, it was nothing to do with him. Forty-five minutes later after two meals, three coffees and four expensive Danish lagers – it certainly was something to do with him.

"Ten bob notes! What's your game, pal? Is this some kind of joke?! Now come on. Pay up or else!" Josh looked in desperation at Creek.

"No point looking at me, Beecham! I spent all my funny mon – er – money on the petrol. What do you think you're playing at?! Didn't you know they scrapped ten shilling notes years ago?!"

"No I didn't! I haven't used funny money since 1968! How was I to know it's not legal tender any more!"

"Funny money? 1968? What's goin' on 'ere? Jailbreak, is it? The forger and his gofer up the same ladder? I'm calling the police!" yelled the proprietor.

There was panic in Josh's face. Was it time to bring a little magic into the non-magic world? But this was decided for him by his estranged cousin.

'SUSPENDICUM TEMPORARE!'

Ezekiel Creek had slowly been removing the wand from his jacket pocket while the proprietor ranted on. The proprietor froze to the spot as did the only other customer in the establishment. It looked like this poor chap had been about to speak, as he was now rigid in his seat with his mouth wide open doing a great impression of a goldfish.

"What did you do that for?!" shouted Josh, who was very relieved he had,

but certainly wasn't going to tell Ezekiel Creek that.

"It's the only way. Right, you tie him up, I'll rob the safe."

"What?!"

"Only joking. Pass me your money, Beecham, now."

"What for? It's out of date isn't it?"

"Don't ask questions, they'll be back to normal soon. Give it here, all of it!"

Josh did as he was told but had no idea what was to happen.

There were twenty ten shilling notes in all. Ezekiel Creek spread them out on the table Lizzie side up, waved his wand over them twice, and then uttered the incantation:

'CURRENCIO UPDATIO TRANSFERCILATUM!'

Like a stage magic trick, each one of the ten shilling notes turned over on their own and became brand new ten pound notes.

"Well well well! Ezekiel Creek, the common criminal! Ripping off the ordinary folk with forged money. Shall I tell that to Professor Winch?!"

"You, Beecham, can tell him what you like, but that is not forged money, it is real, unadulterated perfectly legal tender – non-magic funny money – OK? I have simply swapped old currency for new. You can't do it with coins but you can with notes – didn't you know that? Oh, of course you wouldn't, the last time you had anything to do with funny money was buying Uncle Sam's Meat Balls at the corner shop in 1968."

"It's Uncle Joe's, actually, and it's Mint Balls. And what's this transfercilatum caper?"

"Ordinary folk have Internet Banking, we have Interspell Banking, that's all."

"But you changed ten bob notes for ten pound notes. How can that be?"

"Er – index linked. Or inflation to you!" said the inspired and yet patronising Ezekiel Creek, but only when he's with Josh Beecham.

A much wiser Josh kept quiet for the moment. With the cafe proprietor paid in full, Josh in possession of a hundred and fifty pounds in up to date funny money, and with Ezekiel Creek pocketing twenty per cent commission, the unlikely dynamic duo got back in the car and continued their journey to Aberystwyth.

After what seemed to be hours and hours and hours but was only hours and hours and a few minutes, they drove into the town centre. It wasn't long before Ezekiel Creek spotted a small piece of waste ground to the left of Terrace Street, the main street in the town.

Ezekiel Creek parked up, killed the engine and went to get out, but Josh held him back.

"Before we go, Creek, I just want to say something: you got us both out of a scrape back there, and there is absolutely no excuse for me not to show gratitude to you when it's called for, so, thank you."

"Let's go," replied Ezekiel Creek.

"You're welcome," sighed a resigned Josh, "and don't forget your bag of tricks, or your toads," he added sarcastically in a whisper, but he was still heard.

"Toads? Where we're going – we won't need – toads," came the strange reply.

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Good Evening Aberystwyth!

THE FORGER AND HIS GOFER, as our cafe proprietor had so eloquently named Ezekiel Creek and Josh Beecham, walked up the side street, left onto Terrace Street, and on up to the Promenade.

They received a few funny looks here and there, mostly from locals who over the years had tired of the antics of its somewhat temporary residents, the students of the University of Aberystwyth. Some of these were from the University of Abracadrystwyth, but to the locals these were the self-same students dressed up for Rag Week, or drunk, or both.

They turned right to walk along the promenade. They strolled past the usual array of entertainments and amenities found in most sea-side resorts: cafes, fish and chip shops, pubs, hotels and guest-houses along the inner thoroughfare, and with amusement arcades, picnic areas, benches, and even more food and drink establishments which were on the beach-side of the prom'.

Although things have changed now, at the time of our dynamic duo's descent on the town, the university campus was the last building on the northern end of the promenade. This marked the edge of the town and bordered a rough flat common with grassy sand-dunes leading down to the beach, with a drop steeper than most dunes bordering British beaches, making them seem like small cliffs. Beyond this is Constitution Hill; which, on its steepest side, which looks down on the town, boasts the longest electric cliff railway in Europe. At one time, throngs queued at the foot of the hill, impatiently waiting for their turn to make the ascent by train. This was in the days before Spanish and Greek package holidays had taken away those children whose parents had been brought up on Meccano, tin soldiers, hopscotch and skipping ropes, caravan holidays – and bad weather. These were the people who would have thought it a privilege to slowly chug up the mountain in the railway carriage, then come back down and stroll back into town for a pint in one of the many pubs dotted throughout the resort. Not anymore. Nowadays only a few die-hards bother to make the trip up the mountain during the very short period in which the train service is in operation.

They still go to the pubs, though. . .

Some of these catered specifically for tourists, others for students, and there was one which got most of its trade from visiting farmers; this was the Cambrian, at the edge of town. This traditionally catered for thirsty cattle farmers after a long journey and a morning at the nearby cattle market, and was the home of the eponymous 'Cambrian Monday'. This is when not only

the visiting farmers but just about everybody else took advantage of all day opening, which was in those days a rare privilege granted only to some resorts, and some towns which acted as a focal point for specific trades and industries. The real novelty was that Cambrian Monday was every Monday, especially for Josh Beecham when he was a student here, but he certainly wasn't going to reminisce on times past with Ezekiel Creek.

Josh sighed as he walked up the steps with Creek. They went in through the door and up to the reception desk. They had to wait a minute or so while the man in front was asking if this was the right place for *'The Magic of Science'* seminar.

The delay was slightly lengthened while the man was directed to another part of the campus.

"Yes, gentlemen?" said a security guard.

"Do you have any books on Merlin?" asked Creek. The security guard's eyes sprang into life.

"Er – Creek and Beechy Bo' – er – Beecham? Yes? OK, go right on up." (The guard had corrected himself upon seeing the raised eyebrows of Josh Beecham).

They climbed two flights of steps and went in through a set of double doors. Above the doors was written:

'LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERYSTWYTH.'

However, if anyone of a non-magic persuasion had been watching at that moment they would have noticed that once through the doors, the two colleagues though not friends, simply vanished. Once they were through they were immediately in front of another set of identical double doors; above these was the legend:

'LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ABRACADRYSTWYTH.'

They entered the library, the magic library, although it didn't really look any different from any other. There was an aisle running down the centre of the room. Immediately to the right was the reception area where a frumpy looking women with a wig of long black hair and wearing cat's-eye glasses, was sitting at a desk.

On the desk was a very old looking contraption. It had, however, been modified at some point, but even the seashells attached to the top were themselves old and battered. Josh looked at it and mused. The hybrid gizmo was undoubtedly a prototype from years before that was put into use rather than discarded. If it's a telemagickeraph, thought Josh, it's rather an old one. 'Tight-arses', he muttered to himself as he walked on with Creek.

The receptionist looked suspiciously at the two as they passed, but said nothing.

On the left was row after row of book shelves. Most of the books were very

old, very large, and very dusty.

One old professor had *'The Science of Magic'* off the shelf and was flicking though it. There was the occasional wizard struggling to find a spell book for this, and a potion book for that, and there were a couple of students poring through the books on Empires.

There was also an old witch: tall, thin, pale, and dressed all in black, sitting at a table. She was reading: *'Morgana – a Biography'*. She frequently huffed to herself and crossed out the odd paragraph and pencilled in the occasional comment in the margins or footers. Back on the right and beyond reception was a small sitting area, although hardly anyone ever did sit and read there. They scanned the sitting area to see if they could spot Finbar O'Reilly. And there he was, sitting on the end chair, or at least hovering in a sitting position.

"And hello again to the two of you, pleasant journey, I hope?" asked the over cheery deceased concert promoter.

"Never mind that," came the curt reply from Ezekiel Creek, "what's the plan?"

"Well, now," replied Finbar, looking at his fob watch, "Seamus and the boys and girls should be here very soon. One thing, though – they do like a rehearsal so you'll both be at a loose end for a few hours, but don't worry, they'll put on the best show you'll ever see in your life – or death. Seamus will introduce you, Professor Creek, as if you were part of the show, then you'll be able to do your stuff. I hope this meets with your approval, gentlemen?"

"Fine, Finbar, that's just grand," said Josh.

"No it's not fine!" protested Professor Creek. "Making me out to be some fifth rate stage magician! And if you call the complex magic that only *I*, from all of the staff at Hemlock Hall can perform (lied Professor Creek), – stuff – again, I'll wring your neck! If you still had one!"

"Suit yourself," replied the indifferent Finbar, who had had centuries of experience in dealing with irate customers.

"Just you make sure you keep your end of the bargain."

"We will, we will, don't worry. Come on – er – Zeke, let's go and get ready," suggested the diplomatic Josh. Professor Creek and Josh Beecham both walked off and out of the library.

"What do you mean, get ready?! That's not for hours! And don't call me Zeke, Beechy Bonce!"

"Suit yourself," said Beechy Bonce, "I'm off for a pie and a pint, you can do what you like."

A reluctant but realistic Ezekiel Creek tarried for a moment, sighed, and followed Josh Beecham to the Red Lion Public House and Hotel.

Both men endured each other's company in total silence for what seemed to be an age, but was only a few hours. Ezekiel Creek surprised Josh by suddenly sharing something that concerned him.

"I don't get this. It's not that long since we were at war with the

Leprechauns. What if it's a trap?"

Josh had had similar thoughts himself.

"Yeah, I know, but apparently these leprechauns fought on our side, at least they did when they were alive . . . we've no option but to trust them."

"I suppose so, but the things I have to do to clear up everyone else's mess," said a still doubtful Ezekiel Creek, as he and Josh drained their drinks and went back to the library.

As soon as they walked back in, the bewigged lady with the cat's-eye glasses came storming right up to them.

"I saw you talking to that ghost before! Are you anything to do with this crowd that's wailing away?! They've chased all my readers off! Now do something!"

Creek and Josh hurried to the end of the room where a large gathering of dead leprechauns were making a terrible racket. Apparently such beings are forever hungry and were at that moment tucking into their supper, which was thirty bags of fish and chips. These had been 'borrowed' from a mobile vendor, who shortly after was on his way to hospital suffering with shock. The ensuing thirst was quenched with gallons of beer and whiskey. Those of the troupé who had started early and thus had enjoyed more 'supper' than the others, were singing at the top of their voices.

The traditionalist and thus out of date Ezekiel Creek had begun to ponder on just how ghosts could partake of anything in the mortal world, but the continuing row shook him out of his musing. Both Ezekiel and Josh reached for their wands, but Josh got there first.

'SILENCIO SOBERARUM!'

The singing stopped, the leprechauns sobered up, and Josh Beecham slipped his wand back into his pocket.

"Right, you singing navvies! Through the double doors and remain quiet until you're given the signal! Move!" Josh Beecham had taken command.

"Humph!" snorted Creek. "Humph!" snorted back Josh.

They all went back through the magic entrance and were once again in the Library of the University of Aberystwyth.

To help with the deception, Josh, Ezekiel and the leprechauns rigged up huge purple curtains across the rear end of the library, leaving just enough room behind for a stage; this would be made up of flattened book shelves. As an extra precaution, a sign was placed in front of the curtains – *'DANGER: EXPOSED ELECTRICAL CABLES – STAY CLEAR'*. This was to ensure none of the students went behind the curtain before the show began.

The rest of the rows of shelves were pushed along on their wheels and were all bunched up together at the opposite end of the library; this was to make room for their captive audience.

Creek then checked over the cauldron borrowed from the History section of their own library. After concluding that it was no more delapidated than the

cauldrons at Hemlock Hall and therefore useable, he set it up ready for use. He then took out his wand from his cloak, and from his bag he took out a perfectly ordinary jam-jar, several bottles in which where a variety of coloured liquids, and several packets of various powders. These were the ingredients needed for not only a number of correction spells which would be activated in several stages, but to also bring about an intense visual display complete with sound and smell. This part of the process was not part of the deep magic of the correction spells, but had been introduced into the proceedings to act purely as a distraction. Creek then poured the liquids and powders into the jar and proceeded to stir the entire concoction vigorously with his wand. Creek stopped stirring and quickly poured the contents of the jar into the cauldron. As he did so, a bright blue plume of smoke drifted up into the air, bringing with it a terrible smell. He looked across at Josh who was sitting quietly, as were the rest of the entourage.

"This is the worst part of this, Beecham, smells like your socks."

"Charming," muttered Josh.

Creek left the cauldron, its contents continuing to release smoke plumes, and took two more packets from his cloak pocket and cut them open. He then walked right around the walls, quietly muttering the initial spell, a magic catalyst which allowed the more complex spells which would follow to be effective. He did this while pouring out the black powder evenly along the bottom of the skirting boards. As he walked around, he went into a routine much akin to a consultant surgeon doing the rounds with his trainees, and of course, thinking everyone was transfixed by his words and actions.

"I have emptied the transmutagenic corrective herbs and potions into the cauldron and I have uttered the transmagicatalyst enchantment, this will fix the mis-aligned magic parameters in conjunction with the Cosmic Continuum. This will free anyone or anything that has been temporally mis-aligned.

"I am now setting the magisealic transmutic combustogens. Once I have uttered the trans-temporal magic enchantment three times, the transm-utagenics will be totally, temporally, and magically realigned."

Creek, with the stage presence of the combined thespianic skills of Barrymore, Olivier, Gielgud – and Reg Varney – walked back behind the curtain and rejoined the others.

The leprechauns, who were partial to a bit of showing off themselves gave a big cheer and a thundering ovation.

"Beat that, Beecham!" said Creek to Josh. Josh had absolutely no idea how to reply to such a crazy remark, so he just turned his face away, grinning.

The troublesome and drunken leprechauns were yet again beginning to make a nuisance of themselves. Ezekiel Creek was deep in thought, doing his best to work out if anything else still needed to be done. But the noise finally got to him and he snapped.

"Will you lot pack in that terrible caterwauling! I AM TRYING TO THINK!"

But the leprechauns were making that much of a racket that they didn't

hear him. Josh Beecham yet again became man of the moment, and again pointed his wand at the out of control rabble.

'SILENCIO SOBERARUM!'

In an instant, the leprechauns were silent once more.

"Another word and you'll be straight back to your graves in dear old Blarney. Understood?" threatened Josh. Everyone nodded, even Creek, although he was neither a leprechaun nor spent his days, or nights, in a grave in Ireland.

A late-comer to the proceedings was Finbar O'Reilly. He nodded in greeting and then looked at his fob watch.

"Midnight. It's nearly time," whispered Finbar.

"Shhhhhhhhh," whispered Josh.

The entire company hid behind the curtain.

The Paranormal Society of the University of Aberystwyth trooped into the library with video cameras, tape recorders, TV monitors, meters, ectoplasm detectors and a whole host of electronic equipment. It was soon all rigged up, apart from one monitor.

"There are no more sockets, Biffo. What shall I do?"

"Oh sugar! And we need that monitor most of all," replied Biffo, a short but stocky lad with a mess of wavy fair hair. "OK, go behind the curtains, there's one on the back wall, but be very careful, I would never be able to forgive myself for claiming your equipment if you die."

"Charming," said Dermot, better known as Derm.

"You're welcome," said Biff distractedly while sorting out his tool box. He then pulled out a 4-plug multi-socket he'd forgotten was there. "Oh, Derm, hang on, don't risk it, just use this."

The hidden assembly breathed a collective sigh of relief. A few moments later the equipment was finally up and running and the students settled down, musing on whether the stakeout would be fruitful, or whether it would be a night of disappointment broken only by chit-chat, card playing and snoring.

Finbar turned to the leader of the leprechauns. "Now's the time, Seamus. Go to it and good luck!"

"Ta very koindly, we'll do aor best."

A ghostly leprechaun called Imelda flew directly across one of the video cameras, at a whoosh at first, to make an impact on the only student bothering to check the monitors.

"Hey! Hey! You lot! Wake up! I saw something! Come over here, quick!"

The rest of the gang, eighteen in all, made their way over to the monitor, most of them very slowly as they had been in a deep sleep.

"It just flew right across the screen. It looked like a ghost – a ghost of a young girl!"

"That was a flippin' moth, Derek. That's three times this week you've

disturbed me from my kip."

"But it looked like a girl! And seeing as I'm the only one botheri— hey! Hey! There it – er – she again!"

"There it she again?! Get some sleep, Derek, I'll take over," said Best-Dressed, so named because he never was. Best-Dressed took his turn at the monitor. He didn't have to wait long until he, too, got the fright of his life. "Forget that, Derek. You're flippin' well right! Here she is, right here, on the screen, staring right at me, which means she's actually righ— AAAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!"

Best-Dressed ran one way, the others ran all over the place. Those with the finest honed sense of self-preservation made their way to the door, which was suddenly blocked by the largest and ugliest leprechaun, Liam Kilderrick. He was also the most stupid of the outfit and was only tolerated because he was Seamus's cousin. He was unable to do anything but shout his own name and obey the simplest commands, such as, 'Stand there by the door'.

As Derek tried to get out, Liam commenced his chilling mantra, at least as far as Derek was concerned, and very loudly at that. "LIAM KILLDERRICK! LIAM KILLDERRICK!"

"Aaaaaarrrgghh. Help!" screamed Derek, and ran back into the library, frantically searching for another exit.

The rest of the students also decided to follow suit, but this time Imelda hovered right in front of them and in an instant they were frozen to the spot. Imelda spoke quietly and very gently.

"Please, don't be frightened. I wish to talk to you. You will stay and talk to me, won't you? I promise you won't come to any harm."

The students, not believing a word of it, were too scared to disagree and all meekly nodded.

"Let's all sit, me as well. Please, do sit down," said Imelda, ever more meekly. The students obeyed this blood-curdling, highly threatening demand by slumping to the ground as one. Imelda knew that the only way to calm the terrified students was to get them to do something practical, which might just take the edge off their fear, then gradually, she may be able to get through to them that they really were perfectly safe.

"Er – please, do fetch your sandwiches and your drinks. You look – er – discumstarverated. You will feel better then."

Knowing that disobedience would bring instant death or even an agonisingly slow death over an open fire, the students obeyed the She-Ghost Warrior Fire-Dragoness.

There was an almighty scramble to where the coats and bags and provisions had been piled. Vegetarians brought back roast beef sandwiches and the lactose intolerant gulped down pints of full fat milk. Imelda sighed. This wasn't getting anywhere after all, and so she gave up trying to placate the terrified students.

"Would you like to see a concert featuring some dead people?"

The collective face of the Paranormal Society of The University of Aberystwyth collectively nodded as one, with many ofthe open mouthed dropping their sandwiches, which were being eaten under the direst of death threats.

"Oh, you would? That's lovely! See, I told you we would all get on like a house on fire, didn't I?" gushed Imelda, while clapping her hands with glee.

The students, fearing that the homes of their loved ones far away were being hovered over by warlocks brandishing flame-wands ready to burn them to the ground, again nodded as one supplicant body.

"Sit down again if you would, please, everyone! Thank you."

The dull thud from the impact of eighteen students hitting the floor hard, lightened in tone with each echo around the room.

The Dead Leprechauns of Tralee looked surprisingly fresh and clean considering most had been dead for over fifty years. They were in place, and were ready for the off.

They were a travelling show-band and each night they went to a different graveyard to put on a concert. On the odd occasion they would be asked to perform at a one-off special event, such as this evening's show. They all danced, sang, and played instruments, and even cleverly used magic to enhance their surroundings. They had promised to do something spectacular this evening.

Professor Ezekiel Creek changed into his brightly coloured stage robes and stood by his cauldron, mustering as much dignity as he could while surrounded by dead leprechauns.

Josh and Finbar and the useless Liam sat out of the way to the side of the makeshift stage.

The curtains went up at the same time as four of the leprechauns played a fanfare on their trumpets and bugles.

"Good Evening, Aberystwyth!" shouted Seamus O'Hoolihan, the leader of the troop. "We hope you enjoy the extravaganza we've prepared for you all tonight!"

The students, obviously in an overdrive of sheer elation at such a huge leap in Ghost-Human relations, sat there open mouthed. One student, Karen, was so overjoyed, that her corned beef sandwich was still hanging down from her mouth without her realising it.

The Dead Leprechauns of Tralee burst into life.

Their opening number was, *'If you ever go across the sea to Ireland.'* The singing was led by Seamus, ably assisted by Con, Mickey and Pat, who sang the harmonies in barbershop style, with their hands on their hearts as they crooned along.

Upon finishing, they all stood there, awaiting applause. Unfortunately, they were so good that the rapture of the students reached such new depths that they could only sit there open mouthed.

Behind the scenes two deceased Irish wizards (and of course musicians), Michael O'Henry and Henry O'Michael, had been casting a spell to magic up a

more appropriate setting for the next song. The stage was turned into an Irish pub and Ezekiel Creek became a hat-stand in the corner.

"Thank you, thank you!" shouted Seamus. "Glad you liked it! Now for our next little ditty, we'd like to sing an old favourite of everyone's on both sides of the Irish Sea. It's called, *'The Wild Rover'* – take it away, Slugger!'

To add to the lusty vocals from former champion potin drinker and shantyman, Slugger O'Toole (who was – and still is – drunk as a rule), most of the rest played their banjos, fiddles, harps, flutes, and drums, though of the Irish sort, the bodhran. The remainder of the leprechauns, including their female contingent, danced an upbeat waltz as Slugger belted out this timeless classic.

The song continued while the remainder of the leprechauns stood at the bar drinking.

"I hope that's not real beer," said the hat-stand.

From the back of the stage the only thing our other friends could see was a haze of blue fog.

'The Wild Rover' came to an end to no applause whatsoever.

The stoic deceased troubadors moved straight on to *'As the Hammer hits the Anvil'*. This time, a young chap (when he died) – the late great Sean Gilhooley – sang the lead. The fiddlers and flautists provided the music while Feargal the barman did nothing but stand there and pretend to dry a glass over and over again, joining in the occasional chorus with a silly grin on his face and with a bowler hat on his head. The little dance troupe did a gentle waltz around the bar.

The ghostly roadshow concluded their song about blacksmiths and forges and moved on to what turned out to be the last song of the evening. This was *'Isn't it Grand, Boys, to be Bloody Well Dead'*.

Our students seemed to be in catatonic shock at witnessing such musical brilliance, but Seamus wasn't fooled. He went over to Josh.

"Ah, to heck with it! You've scared 'em all into oblivion! We're cutting the rest, go to the finale. Tell the hat-stand to be ready."

"We've scared 'em all?!" retorted Josh, but he left it at that.

The duly restored Ezekiel Creek was ready, bottle in one hand and a wand in the other. This was the final ingredient, a magic catalyst which would release the inherent power formulated earlier on.

Seamus the showman proved worthy of the name. Despite performing in front of a terrified crowd of students frozen to the spot, he did his fully blarnified best to introduce the last number – a real humdinger of a sketch set in a magic castle. First, he turned to Creek and gave a quick nod, Creek nodded back.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Let me now transport you back in time to a gentler era, where the pace of life was slow and easy – where magic folk lived happily alongside human-kind. Where else but to dear old Ireland! To Erin the brave!

"But first – to get us there – please be patient as I now ask the great

Spellondo himself to use his magic enchantments. Spellondo – if you please!"

Seamus turned to one side, held his arm out to herald this great magician, and disappeared into the shadows, while Ezekiel Creek, in his finest robes and wizard's hat, stood and faced his audience while bathed in a radiant ball of light.

Creek lifted the bottle and poured the contents into the cauldron. He waved his wand over the cauldron three times and then uttered the incantation:

'TRANSPORTICO TRANSMUTICUM LOSTEMUNDO IRREGULATIUM! CORRECTIUM COSMODIO CONTINUUM FOLIO IRREGULATICUS DIMENSICUM!'

The cauldron hissed and bubbled and gave off sparks of every colour of the rainbow. The whole room vibrated. There was a huge rumbling sound which became louder and louder, and ended up like a thunderclap sounding directly overhead.

A thick pall of yellow smoke arose from the cauldron and drifted over the whole of the library. At this, Creek gave a nod to Josh that the Addendum should be retrievable.

Josh quickly went over to the vault, ready to pick up the folder containing the Addendum. He had to be out of the way before the final Correcting spells were uttered.

He tapped his wand on the vault three times while uttering a sequence of numbers. The door opened, Josh grabbed the leather folder that was in there and quickly moved out of the way.

Creek continued:

'COMBUSTIUM PERMANENTO SEALIUM TRANSMUTATO! COMBUSTIUM PERMANENTO SEALIUM TRANSMUTATO! COMBUSTIUM PERMANENTO SEALIUM TRANSMUTATO!'

There was another thunderclap.

This time the library visibly rocked from side to side, and explosive sounds like bombs going off filled the room.

As the bangs and the explosions faded away, red, yellow and black sparks could be seen leaving the cauldron, and they shot along right around the skirting boards.

The sparks sped along and every few seconds there was an explosive display of more sparks and bright lights, with the powder even whipping itself up into little whirlwinds which sped along the skirting boards.

A sparkly multi-coloured ghost train formed out of the dust and wailed as it sped right around the room twice. This in turn gave way to animal displays, complete with roars, as lions and tigers formed out of the multi-coloured powder, which jumped up and out and growled threateningly at the still deep frozen audience.

Unfortunately, the only ones impressed were the leprechauns and Josh and Finbar. None of them could help themselves as they stood and applauded and cheered and whooped. It was a magnificent display.

The vault door, usually a dull grey, was now a luminous orange. This was what Creek really wanted to see, as it indicated that dual cosmic realignment of both the magic and non-magic vaults had been achieved.

Creek again nodded to Josh to indicate that as well as the successful retrieval of the Addendum, the troublesome blip on transmuting to the Library of the University of Abracadrystwyth had also been corrected.

The display was rounded off with a magic storm, with lightning engulfing the room and everyone in it.

It all finally came to an end with one mighty thunderclap.

Ezekiel's efforts had been genuinely appreciated by all – at least all those not in shock – and he gave a big grin on hearing the ovation.

Seamus moved through the shadows over to Creek.

"Well done, Zeke!" said the over familiar showman and dead leprechaun. "Pity this lot are too scared to appreciate a good show! Now seeing as you won't be needed for the finale, why not go to the back and watch it properly?"

Ezekiel quickly agreed to this suggestion. The length of a library wasn't much, but it was still a welcome distance for him to be from dead leprechauns. He was joined by Josh and Finbar.

The seemingly pointless but highly enjoyable show continued.

The stage went black. When it lit up again, it looked a little like a cinema screen but one without any edges.

The image on the magical screen was that of a young man walking along a country lane in Ireland, who then gets offered a lift by an old tinker who had come up alongside him on his horse and cart.

Seamus gave a short introduction to set the scene.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our story is all about a young man, an old tinker, and a magical journey. Let us travel with them as our young friend climbs aboard – and drinks . . .

'The Milk From The Tinker's Cart!''

Seamus read a poem to accompany the images on the screen. He gave his recital a broguish meter – not quite a song but more than just the usual reading of a poem:

'One day as I sat on a tinker's cart, twas early in the morn'.
I started drinkin' a jug of milk, just at the break of dawn.
Well, I drank and I drank and still there was more,
and it tasted so creamy and fine.
Then you'll never believe what happened to me,
just by the old Kerry mine.

With a twirl of his head, the tinker-man said,'We're off to see Brian Boru'.
The horse flapped his wings and the cart took right off,
up high in the air we flew.
We flew up so highand looked down from the sky,
upon pixies a ploughin' the land.
And I'm sure that good old Saint Patrick had a jug of ale in his hand.

Then we heard a shout, it was something about,
'Now don't be late for the ball!'
Then I was amazed, as me eyes they did gaze,
upon leprechauns two-foot tall.
Then our journey was ended, the horse he descended,
by a lake full of old Irish brew.
Then I lifted me head, and I saw straight-ahead, the old castle of Brian Boru.

I walked off to see, what's waiting for me,
in the grounds so wondrous and fine.
There were nymphs and fairies all flying about,
and gargoyles a-gushing red wine.
Music and laughter were heard from the house,
when a little green man said – 'Come in!
Is it whiskey your tipple', he said with a giggle, 'or brandy, or maybe a gin?'

So I walked through the door, and twas there that I saw,
a goblin a-bangin' a drum.
'Well, who have we here?' said Brian Boru,
'I am awfully glad you could come!'
Inside that big house, well, I feasted me eyes,
upon maidens a-dancin' a jig.
Then all those still able, then sat at the table,
and feasted on duckling and pig.

Old Brian himself did stand up and say,
'Friendly elves, please welcome our friend!'
Then the dwarves who were seven, said,
'Welcome to Heaven! This is our world without end!'

There was Guinness and stout, and whiskey about,
and barrels and barrels of bitter.
So I had me fill, which made me feel ill,
and made everyone laugh and then titter!
The lady elves stood, and they bowed and held hands,
and the fiddles struck up River Dance.
I was coaxed to take part but I hadn't the art,
and fell down and split open my pants.

The dwarves, elves and goblins all went into fits,
the King laughed so hard he went blue.
'Aorgh now, begorrah!' he said with a slobber,
'Is there anything else you can do?!'

Well, I've never felt so happy and free, and I felt I was turning the tide,
until I awoke on that old tinker's cart, with an empty jug at me side.
I'd swear on me life, even swear at me wife,
that I couldn't have felt more serene,
'til the tinker did say, in his kind Irish way,
'You've drunk all me flippin' pocheen!'

(Author's note – 'pocheen' is the phonetic spelling of 'Potin' – an old illegally distilled spirit).

The students remained frozen to the spot, but Josh and Finbar walked towards the stage, shouting, whistling and cheering the leprechauns. As expected, Ezekiel kept his distance, but the fair minded professor (most of the time), still applauded a great show. Liam showed his appreciation in his own unique way. 'LIAM KILDERRICK! LIAM KILDERRICK!'

Seamus and his pals had conjured up the whole scene in the castle of Brian Boru: pixies, elves, the lot, as well as leprechauns, of course. It had fitted the poem perfectly, and the timing between the two was spot on.

"Well, Seamus, you did it!" said Josh. "That was brilliant!"

But before Seamus and Josh could talk about the show, they were interrupted by Professor Creek.

"Ahem! What about these spotty youths, then? It's a good job they are in some sort of shock, with you lot meandering all over the place!"

"Yes, you're right, sorry, Creek. The trouble is, when they come out of it, they will remember, but they've been so scared that it's not a memory they will particularly enjoy. Only one thing for it. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Creek, who then waved his wand over the students.

'MNEMONIUM ERADICATO! LIBRESIUM PERMANOSO!'

"Good! That'll put them in dreamland for twenty minutes or so. Time we were off, then?" said Josh.

"Er – Beecham, we can't go just yet, I've got another job to do, but the others can go . . . best if they did, actually."

Josh was mystified, but he was also annoyed at the continual twists.

The Dead Leprechauns of Tralee shouted their goodbyes, the men bowed, the ladies curtsied and Liam shouted, 'LIAM KILDERRICK!' They vanished in a puff of smoke. But Creek and Josh were not quite alone.

Finbar O'Reilly came across and handed Creek a folded piece of paper. Creek unfolded it and read its contents.

"What on earth is this?! A bill?! For that load of putrefied blarney?! What on earth can dead leprechauns do with money?!" He looked closer still at the amount. "A thousand jupiters?! I could have got Val Doonican for that!"

"And his rocking chair!" said a laughing Josh.

"This isn't funny, Beecham, we're not paying a penny for that load of garbage. Now, Finbar O'Reilly! Clear off!"

Finbar looked like thunder, and as usual when he was being challenged, his strong Irish brogue came to the fore.

"Oh ai see! When yer thaort it was fer nuthin' they were the wasp's legs–" ('Bee's knees', whispered Josh). "Er – bee's knees . . . but neow they wunts payin' they we're rubbish! We'll soon see abute that!"

Finbar raised his fists.

Ezekiel Creek immediately adopted the pose of a baldy, moustachioed Prussian Pugilist, except he was neither Prussian nor baldy – but he did occasionally sport a moustache. He sprang around Finbar as if he was world champion, but it was many years since he had last boxed in the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Boxing Championships and was not the boxer he once was. Finbar took one swing and decked Ezekiel Creek, knocking him out cold, and at the same time finally disproving Ezekiel's unshared theory that ghosts could not assume a solid reality, a theory already badly weakened after witnessing the Dead Leprechauns of Tralee chomping merrily away on fish and chips.

Josh, although laughing, thought it timely to intervene.

"OK, Finbar, that's enough, you've made your point – of course you'll all get paid." He bent down and took the bill out of Creek's hand. "I'll see to it myself. A week be all right?"

"Ah, I sees you're a gentleman. Not loik thart bag 'o' wind. A week's foin 'n' darndy, smashin'! Well, Mr Beecham, I'll be on moy way. G'night to all 'ere, 'part from 'im!"

After bowing to his two mortal companions, Finbar O'Reilly, Impresario of Ireland, hovered off with his one-hundred per cent commission.

Professor Creek was right about one thing – dead leprechauns don't need money. The truth is, neither do dead concert promoters, but old habits – and old concert promoters – die hard.

Creek finally regained consciousness and stood up and dusted himself down. He slyly made sure Finbar was well and truly gone and said, reassuming the pose, "Where is the little scamp? One lucky punch won't stop me!"

"Forget it. He's gone. OK, Creek, give it to me straight. Why are we not going back right now?" demanded Josh. Creek's lips curled as if he was about to enjoy keeping Josh guessing, but the many and forceful warnings from Professor Winch echoed in his brain.

"Fair enough, Beecham, I'll level with you, but only as far as my orders allow, OK?"

Josh nodded.

"We've got to stay and find out how, and why the – er – Book of

Chaotagens went missing."

"Oh, you mean find out who the spy is?"

"You knew, then?!"

"Nope! But I do now!"

Josh grinned, he didn't mean to but he just couldn't help it. He paused, waiting for the inevitable fury of Ezekiel Creek, but. . .

"Ha!"

Josh was astounded. Then. . . "Ha ha ha ha! ho ho ho!"

Then Josh.

"Ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!"

35

Cauldron of Deception

CREEK AND JOSH laughed so long and loud that they unwittingly disturbed the students from their magically enforced slumber. As quick as they could, they went back out of the door and back into the magic library.

They sat down in the reception area; the receptionist had long since gone home.

"Where do we start?" asked Josh.

"I'm thinking, Beecham, give me a chance!"

"Rightyo," said Josh, moving around reception on a swivel chair on casters.

"And you can pack that in. You're nothing but an overgrown schoolboy!"

"Guilty as charged!"

Creek went into deep thought mode with one finger resting on one lip. "Hmmm – yes, nice and simple — let's see. . . "

"Is that anything you would care to share with me?" asked Josh.

"Maybe, just maybe," said Creek. Then, adopting a brusque business like tone, he added, "would you agree with me that there is no such thing as perfect espionage?"

"Sorry? I'm not with you there, Creek. What do you mean, exactly?"

"Espionage, just like everything else in this world, is not a perfect thing – it can't be, by definition it can't be."

"Sorry, still means nothing to me. Any chance of spelling it out nice and simple?"

"Looks like I'll have to!" said Creek, and rudely at that. "Espionage at its most simple, is somebody wanting something very badly indeed from someone who certainly does not want to lose it, be it brand new secret technology, information or even people themselves. Can you at least understand that?"

"Yes, of course I can! Look here, Creek, I'm not stu—"

"Don't take it personally, man, I was thinking aloud, that's all."

Creek's interruption took the wind out of Josh Beecham's insulted sails, but Josh still knew it was indeed an insult, but he let it go. Creek continued and surprisingly for Josh, it began with an apology.

"Sorry, Beecham, I'm no more a spy catcher than you are. I'd say once the game's afoot, to quote Sherlock, you will be better at this lark than I am. However, we know the book's gone, and we know why and we know to whom it is destined. This in a way, although bad for us initially, shows that espionage is not perfect. Why? Because we know these things. It is very difficult for a spy to do something damaging to his opponents, without his opponents finding out and wanting to get even, whatever getting even

transpires to be in any given situation."

Josh finally had some thoughts on the matter.

"I hope you don't mind my saying, but philosophising or even stating the obvious, doesn't necessarily bring enlightenment."

"No, no, it doesn't, very true, but it helps to focus, old man – it helps to focus!"

Josh was amused, although he didn't show it. The phrase just did not fit with Creek's suddenly acquired, forceful Tally Ho! type delivery in his voice. Apart from requesting less of the old man, he let Creek continue.

" . . . We may be in luck, but equally, we may have run out of it. If this spy found out about the book so easily and pinched it, he or she is certainly going to try the same again with the Addendum. Where is it, by the way?"

Josh tapped his coat as a sign he had it safely in his pocket.

"What is that supposed to mean?! Indigestion? Heart problems? Show me the Addendum! Now!"

Josh gave a big sigh and took the leather folder out of his coat pocket and passed it to Creek, who impatiently yanked it open. It was there, safe and sound. He held tightly onto it for a moment, showing Josh ill-deserved mistrust, but after a few seconds he closed the folder and reluctantly handed it back.

"Thank you!" said Josh.

"OK, Beecham, you've kept it safe, but that doesn't mean there won't be an attempt to take it from you."

"If there is, we can box our way out, eh?!"

Creek ruefully rubbed his slightly reddened chin and said quietly, "Um – lucky punch, happens to us all."

Josh shared a sudden doubt with Creek.

"Do you know, we'll have to be really careful here, I'm not certain if regaining possession of the Addendum is of such a high enough priority for our enemies. We know the location of the wand has been compromised, which means that we're going hell for leather all for the sake of a poxy De-Activation spell."

"I know what you're getting at, Beecham, I even asked the headmaster the same question, near enough, but it's all about control. If Zenith, or the warlocks, or anyone else for that matter, manages to work out the ancient inscription on the Addendum, they would then be in complete control of the wand. When it comes to these evil fiends, we can only think that they want to use the wand in the way it was designed to be used. However, there may be circumstances in which they need to de-activate it, so to speak, perhaps as a result of an internal power struggle, or if they think we would upon retrieving it, use it against them. It could be anything like that. Although if I can use a nuclear analogy to make it even clearer: one may have the bomb stashed away somewhere, but it would be nice if it came with an off-switch, eh? (Josh nodded, but allowed Creek to continue). Thankfully, Professor Winch and the others do not believe that the inscription had been deciphered

before the Addendum was back in our hands, which is good news, but this fact alone makes it important enough itself to steal back, very much so."

Josh jokingly admitted to Creek that when it came to Sherlock Holmes metaphors and analogies, Creek was, after all, the super sleuth himself as he couldn't find any faults in his deductive reasoning so far, but Josh had one further doubt. "Can we be sure that the spy actually knows of the Addendum? The book, OK, but the Addendum? That's a more recent affair, isn't it?"

"You're right that there's no absolute proof of knowledge, despite it being accepted that Professor Zenith himself does indeed know, but we have to exercise extreme caution at all times. Ironically, I suppose, this means accepting that your opponent is up with the game, or even ahead of it. My money is on the spy knowing all about the Addendum, purely because he or she knew about the Book of Chaotagens. Professor Winch told me (said rather superciliously, at which Josh shook his head and tutted quietly), he didn't think the enemy have yet begun using spy cells which act purely on their own initiative. I – er – he thinks they still get their orders and information from above," said Professor Creek.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. I take it this means that the spy also knows about tonight's performance?"

"Undoubtedly," replied Creek. "That, more than anything else, I think, makes it likely that the spy has been alerted and may well attempt to grab the Addendum before we can return to Hemlock Hall. It's ironic again really, the very thing that needs to be in a secure place, instead has to be the gambling chip to play the game."

As Josh liked speaking in metaphors, he readily joined in with the gambling lingo.

"So, if we're lucky, the cards will be on the table tonight."

"Game, set and match," replied Creek, losing the theme.

They seemed to have covered everything that was possible to cover, and Josh was very tired. The trouble was, Creek was also exhausted. It was nearly 5:00 a.m. and they had after all been on the go from the previous afternoon, but time was of the essence. If it were not the case they could have booked into a hotel and rested before returning to the fray. One of them could even have returned to Hemlock Hall with the Addendum, but there was simply no time. At that very moment the Warlocks of Bucharest were battling through a Siberian blizzard in their efforts to begin exacting their revenge.

"Only one thing for it, Beecham – shifts. You get some rest and I'll keep watch, we'll swap on the hour until the library opens at zero nine-hundred hours – er – nine o'clock. If our spy is a daytime operator, he's got the advantage, for now. OK?"

Josh Beecham just nodded; he was too tired to remonstrate any further over Creek's perceptions of his general intelligence. He began to put together a make-shift bed from two easy chairs and his overcoat, muttering, 'Zero

nine-hundred hours. Ha!' as he did so.

*

It was early morning at Hemlock Hall.

Harry Gripweed was busy putting things right around the grounds, picking up odds and ends which had been left there by students the day before. After he had finished cleaning and clearing, he went around to the side of the school by the greenhouses. This is where he kept his Horti-cauldron. This was a special, huge, cauldron shaped machine. It had a sloping hatch, which when open was where all the raw materials were thrown into. It was for mincing and liquidising grass, weeds, wild herbs and flowers that grew around the grounds. It was attached to a bottling and labelling machine, which, after the Horti-cauldron had mashed and sorted everything, bottled and labelled many of the ingredients needed in lessons. When the process is complete, the bottle moves along a little conveyor belt from within the bottling machine, through a small flap at the side and the bottle comes to rest on a ledge on the edge of the machine. This saved Professor Cornstone and Miss Llefevre, as well as some of the other teachers, a great deal of preparation time. Although he got on well with all of the other staff, Harry, as was to be expected, certainly did not get on with Professor Cornstone.

Harry looked at the Horti-cauldron, and gave a wicked smile. "That Professor Cornstone, I'll stick him in 'ere one day. I wonder what it'd make? Cornweed! Yes, that's a good'n', Cornweed! I likes that!" He chuckled to himself as he began his mind-numbing labours.

As Harry continued to chuckle to himself as he toiled away, he thought he heard his name being spoken, very quietly, but very sinister rather than soft.

"Harry Gripweed."

"Eh?"

"Turn around. This way."

"Wh-who's there?!"

"Turn around! Right now!"

Harry Gripweed turned around, and standing before him was a man in a long black cloak, but with a scarf totally covering his face.

"Open the hatch!" said the threatening gruff voice.

"Wh-wh-what f-f-f-for?!"

"Open it! Now!" said the voice even more threateningly, and this time Harry saw a glint of steel in his hands. He opened the hatch.

Unfortunately for Harry, this was a two-handed operation, and he needed to turn back around to do it properly. No sooner had the hatch fully opened than Harry was bundled right into the Horti-cauldron, and the hatch was slammed shut and locked by the cloaked assailant. Harry banged, kicked, knocked, and screamed.

"Aaaaargh! Help! Help! Let me out! Let me Ooooouuuuuttt!" The terrifying racket from Harry faded away, until silence.

The mystery man picked up Harry's starting wand, rapped the Horti-cauldron three times, and it sprang into life. There were mashing noises,

grinding noises, bumps, bangs, and a strange scraping noise. Eventually, the bottler and labeller burst into action with a clanking and swirling sound. Finally, with a ching! type noise, a little like a microwave oven, it stopped. Slowly and silently, the conveyor belt moved along a few inches. One bottle of red, purple and blue gunge appeared; it bore the name *'GRIPWORT'*, and had a little picture of Harry Gripweed – smiling, showing off his gummy mouth and holding a mop and bucket.

The cloaked stranger and kidnapper picked up his bottled hostage and walked off, whistling, out of the grounds and on to his next mysterious destination.

It wasn't too long before Harry became conspicuous by his absence. An unusually flustered Professor Winch ordered all of the staff to his office and demanded that a search be made. Most, although concerned for their good friend Harry, were a bit unsure as to what to do and where to look exactly.

"But he can't have gone far! Go and find him! There's Empires today, the pitch needs rearranging, and the dining room is in a right mess!" insisted Professor Winch.

"Certainly, 'Eadmaster, certainly, but I finks summat dreadful 'as 'appened. Yeeer," said Daphne Llefevre.

Harry Gripweed was not the only missing person on Professor Winch's mind. He had just received word from the Magic Council that a young chap, Hector Jibb, had been missing for three days from his job as Chief Book Procurer at the University of Abracadrystwyth. He took out his telemagick-eraph mark five, and went into the annexe.

"Professor Creek? Mr Beecham? Can you hear me? It's Professor Winch here."

"Uh?! Oh, hello, Headmaster, Ezekiel here. What's wrong?"

"A great deal, Ezekiel. Is Josh with you?"

"Hello, Professor, Josh here. What's the matter?!"

"Firstly, one of the staff from the university has not reported in for three days, the Council contacted me a short while ago. Apparently he's an unreliable fellow, couldn't stay off the booze, forever off sick and so on. They had been thinking about sacking him. If it were anyone else I would not be overly concerned, but he was Chief Book Procurer. I am worried that this could be our chappie. He may have procured the Book of Chaotagens, knowing he was soon out on his ear and wouldn't get an opportunity to steal it later on, or he could be a sleeper for the enemy who just bided his time. Now, Josh, just in case you're wondering what I'm on about . . . I gave Professor Creek an extra task, as we have a—"

"A spy, Headmaster? Don't worry, I found out last night. Don't be angry with Creek though, I – er – tricked him into telling me."

"Hmmm . . . that figures! No matter, as I was just about to tell you. Now what—"

This time, Creek interrupted. "Excuse me, Headmaster, but I've just had a

thought. If this is the spy, does that mean he's also in The League of Mordred?"

"That, I do not know. In one way, I hope so because it probably means you only have to find one person. If our young Mr Jibb is not, it still might mean he's working for them in some limited capacity. If that's the case you have two people to find and apprehend, but further complicating matters is the possibility that this Jibb fellow may well be totally innocent."

Creek and Josh looked at each other in absolute despair. Things were getting worse by the minute. Not only had their scheduled one hour breaks been a total waste of time due to the uncomfortable library furniture, but there was possibly a second spy to contend with.

Eventually, Creek spoke up again. "I'm not sure how we are to deal with this, Headmaster. Do you think we should look for this Jibb? Check his home, his office and such like?"

"No, that would be a waste of time. Our Council colleagues have already done all that. No sign of any trouble or treachery, no clues, nothing. If something does come up concerning Jibb, I will ask you to split up – one spy, one spy-catcher as it were. Until then, please stick to the original plan. Oh, by the way, Mr Gripweed has also gone missing."

"What?!" said both the over-tired and over-stressed Messrs Creek and Beecham.

"I'm sorry to burden you both with this as well, but he doesn't seem to be around. I'm hoping, just like our Mr Jibb, perhaps, he has simply over-indulged and has a bad head and is sleeping it off in Harris's barn."

"Let's hope Bezzie doesn't catch him on his straw, then!" joked Josh.

"Maybe he already has!" replied Professor Winch. "But seriously, the more I think about it the more it concerns me. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned this as there's nothing you can do there about Harry Gripweed. Please, return to your task and good luck to both of you. Bye for now."

"Er – yes, goodbye, Headmaster," said Creek, miles away.

"Goodbye, Professor. And best of luck in finding Harry," said Josh.

Creek sat in a chair with his head in his hands. He felt his boss had given him an impossible task. He didn't know what to do and he didn't know what to say to his fellow spy-catcher. Eventually. . .

"Any ideas, Beecham? I have to admit I haven't a clue what's going on."

"No, not really, but I know we have got to stay focussed. We are only two people, we cannot be expected to solve a three part puzzle when the two of us haven't even got to grips properly with the first part. But if we stay focussed we may yet do that, if we're lucky."

This gave Creek renewed vigour, although he was still physically tired as was Josh, which wasn't helping things.

"Yes, you're right, Beecham. One thing, or rather – one spy at a time – eh?"

In return, Josh managed a weak smile. "One thing though, Creek, it's just on nine o'clock, or should I say zero nine-hundred hours! The place will open

up any minute. Do you really think our mystery person will turn up in working hours?"

"Unfortunately, there's a good chance. There are swings and roundabouts in every situation. Just as the dead of night provides cover due to most people being tucked up in bed, the general hubbub of a busy office, or in this case, a library, equally provides cover by making the villain difficult to spot in the crowd. This is doubly so if the villain regularly frequents the place anywa— Beecham! Try that antwacky telemagickeraph, if it works, get Professor Winch back."

"What?! Why?!"

"Don't argue! Just do it!"

Josh Beecham ran over to the reception area. He gave the machine a quick look over, and shouted down one of the seashells. "PROFESSOR WINCH! THIS IS JOSH BEECHAM. CAN YOU HEAR—"

"Beecham! Pack it in! You're booming all over the place. It's been modified to be like a public address system!"

"What do I do, then?!" shouted a desperate Josh.

"Break the seashells off and type, it's the original model underneath."

"Got you! OK, here goes. Er – what do you want me to say?"

"Oh, sorry, hang on, I'll take over."

Josh couldn't resist it. Before snapping off the seashells, his voice again boomed all over the library, 'OH SORRY, HANG ON, I'LL TAKE OVER!'

Creek called Josh a clown as he dashed over to the telemagickeraph, bashed the shells with his fist and typed his message out furiously. He was soon engaged yet again in a hurried conversation with Professor Winch.

After a few minutes. . .

"Uh-uh – yes – got you. Thanks, Headmaster, we'll see if it works. Bye."

A curious but confused Josh wanted to know what was going on.

"Listen, and listen good! We don't have much time. The library and university offices open at nine, but I've remembered that each morning at nine there is also a meeting of senior staff in the Principal's Office. Professor Winch is going to interrupt the meeting. He will ask if someone can come and get us as there has been an urgent development, adding that he's failed to get through to us directly. When the messenger turns up, I will then go to the Principal's office and I will make an excuse for you. I will say that you felt sick through lack of sleep and needed rest and that you've booked yourself into the Cardigan Hotel. I will then use the telemagickeraph in the Principal's office to contact Professor Winch. It will be mostly a load of old tosh, of course, but during the conversation I will let it be known that you have the Addendum safely on you, and that you have gone back to the Cardigan Hotel to get some rest.

"If our spy is at the meeting, my guess is he or she will make an excuse to leave the meeting and may try to get the Addendum off you. I will try to leave before this happens and make my way round to your room. One more thing, you'd best not have the Addendum on you after all, just in case

anything goes wrong. Lock it in the room safe, but if it becomes necessary, suggest very strongly that you still have it on your person. Are you with me? Good! Get going!"

Josh Beecham ran to the door but stopped just before he went through it.

"Er – where's the Cardigan Hotel? It must be brand new."

"Top of Terrace Street! Go!"

Creek sat and waited. His next problem was whether the messenger would be the real thing. It enforced his belief that espionage simply could not be about perfection, and by definition it was risky. He settled on the fact that the messenger would not be the spy, as it would not look normal for a senior member of staff, as Creek surmised the spy to be, to suddenly volunteer to do the job of a messenger. These were official posts within the university, and junior posts at that.

Creek realised the time and snatched a book off a shelf and began reading it. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to replace his poor choice, as at that moment the receptionist and a number of knowledge thirsty students came into the library. He carried on reading the large print version (with the title in very large letters) of – *'HOW THE MODERN WOMAN CAN SUCCEED IN THE MAN'S WORLD OF MAGIC – ALL YOUR PROBLEMS ANSWERED'*. He received some very funny looks as the students passed by. Creek was trapped. He went very red, but the only way to hide his embarrassment was to hold up the book to his face, which was immediately spotted by even more students piling into the library. Unfortunately for Creek, it was the type of book that also had the full title as clear as day on the back cover.

"Mr Creek? Excuse me, but are you Mr Creek?"

Creek lowered his book to see a man standing there. He had a boyish face with wavy unkempt hair, trousers at half mast, an ill-fitting jacket and a badly fitting and equally badly worn cap. The man was almost the double of the late, great, famed comic actor, Norman Wisdom.

"Mr Grimsdale sent you, has he?" asked Creek, in reference to Norman Wisdom's equally famed straight-man.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Never mind. Now, young man, I am not *Mr* Creek. However, I am *Professor* Creek. What do you want? I am busy – er – reading," said a red again Professor Creek.

The messenger read the book title and gave a little smirk.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr – er – Professor Creek, but I'm from the Senior Staff Offices. You are to report there immediately and contact Professor – er – Professor Lynch. Is there a Professor Beecham with you, sir? He has to come along, too."

Creek was about to correct him, on all counts, but on further reflection thought it wise not to. Although it was irksome to him to be demoted at the expense of Josh Beecham, that didn't actually matter. However, there could easily be a Lynch wanting to speak to him, and he thought it wise not to give away the fact that he had assumed the messenger had meant Professor

Winch; but he could make one correction after all, contained within an explanation. "I'm afraid *MR* Beecham is not feeling too well, and has gone back to his hotel room."

"Very well, sir. This way please."

With Creek following, the messenger went downstairs, through a set of double doors, and then knocked on and opened a large, foreboding, single oak door. As it was nearing his tea-break he hoped he could quickly pass his charge on to the man who had given him the errand.

"Here you are, Professor, sir – Professor Creek, as requested, but the other gentleman is undisposable."

"Indisposed, you clot! Now get out, Wisdom, and shut the door."

An elderly, red-faced gentleman, although red-faced through rich food and drink rather than embarrassment, gestured for Creek to sit down, but Creek was putting two and two together, and not getting four.

"That boy? He's not really. . . ?"

"Wisdom?! That clown?! Oh, I see what you mean. No, of course not, it's just a nickname. Oh, before we proceed, where is Mr Beecham, exactly?"

"We've had a bad night, sir. He's not too good and is badly in need of rest. He's gone back to the Cardigan."

"Don't blame him. I've got woolly undies on m'self! It's perishing. Oh! You mean the hotel! Ha! Ha! Bad night of it m'self last night. My, my, that five star brandy! What?!"

Creek would normally have been amused by the carry on, and by certain similarities, but he was worried. If this was a meeting, where were the others? How was his load of old tosh on the telemagickeraph going to deceive anyone?

"I'm awfully sorry, Creek, I've no time to talk of brandy and hangovers and such. Maybe later on, eh? Bit of a meeting on this morning, it should have started by now, actually. Oh, here we are. Hello there, Bamber, Magnus, Jeremy, Anne, Peter . . . oh, hello, Barbs, still at the grid? My my! Come on in, and the others, sit down, sit down . . . By the way, Creek, you need to contact Professor Winch, the telemathingymajig is at the end of the room, feel free to use it while we crack on."

Ezekiel Creek had never been so relieved to see such an odd collection of bumbling idiots, but there was someone missing, Principal 'Forgetful' Jones. Creek had a sudden thought: was Jones an attendee at these meetings? When he mentioned to Josh that there was a Principal's meeting, was Jones the Principal – the real Principal of the university – or just an underling in charge of the library? He just couldn't remember. He soon had his answer as the door opened yet again.

"Out of my chair, Charlie, you are not at your club now!" said Principal 'Forgetful' Jones, in a clear, well-spoken but obviously Welsh voice. The elderly, red-cheeked gentleman quickly vacated the boss's chair.

Charlie's equally red-faced drinking partner said sympathetically, "Never mind, Hubbers, sit next to me."

Forgetful Jones, a small, fat-bellied, fat-faced man with very chubby and very ruddy cheeks and a shock of frizzy, jet-black hair, addressed the meeting.

"Sorry I am late, but I, ahem – er – forgot. Oh, hello, Creek. Dreadful business, eh! Dreadful. Er – I'm sorry, Creek, can't be much use to you for the moment, must get this meeting underway, but I'll talk to you later. Oh, I hope Beecham's OK, a good rest should do the trick, eh? So – er – if you'll excuse us all, you just do whatever you need to do."

But Creek wasn't thinking of spouting his load of old tosh just yet. How did Jones know about Josh Beecham? He'd never considered Jones to be a candidate for anything that required cunning and memory, so he had ruled him out as the spy, but not now. He knew that Beecham was 'ill' in bed. How?

A hitherto unconsidered complication to matters was racing around his brain. What if Hector Jibb was in The League of Mordred, and was working with Jones, who wasn't? If it's one thing that Creek accepted as fact was that the book had been stolen by a League member.

"Er – Professor Creek?"

"Um – oh sorry, drifted away there."

It was Jones, looking impatiently over at Creek.

"I'm sorry, Creek, we need the chair. There is a desk chair by the telemagickeraph."

"Oh, sorry. Certainly. Here you are."

Creek rose, and walked over to the far desk, leaving an odd collection of bumbling idiots around a table, discussing heavy nights and five star brandy. "Here goes," he thought to himself. He then spoke into the seashells. "Professor Winch? Are you there? Oh, hello, Professor, it's Creek here. You wanted to talk to me? Uhu. Ahum. What?! Mr Gripweed has gone missing? What can have happened? Unbelievable! Uhu – yes – no . . . I don't think so, but how can you rule out any connection with what Beecham and I are up here for? I suppose so . . . well . . . I see. . .

" . . . Yes, well – no, we didn't get anywhere, not really. We have the goods, though. Yes, they're perfectly safe, Beecham's got them on him . . . no, he's not here with me, one late night too many, I'm afraid. He booked into the Cardigan Hotel, I suspect he's out cold. Right, yes, I'll tell him when he wakes. Goodbye, Professor."

Creek came off the telemagickeraph. He looked over and mentally tallied up the bumbling idiots, one by one, including Principal Jones; they were all still there. This meant that he could get a head start when going back to help Beecham, but he couldn't put the spy off by telling everyone in the room he was doing just that.

"Excuse me, Principal, I'm afraid I'll have to go, I've got a ton of shopping to do. We'll try and have a pint later."

"OK, Creek, see you later," said Jones.

To chauvinistic, brandy fuelled mumblings from most of the others of

'SHOPPING TO DO?!', Creek left the room, and walked out of the building and onto Terrace Street.

At first, he was kicking himself for such a lousy lie . . . Shopping to do! . . . but he felt a bit better when he realised the blithering idiots had accepted it.

He went into various High Street shops, but just as quickly came back out again, checking that he wasn't being followed. It was a tricky game, if he looked like he really was shopping then hopefully the spy would assume that it wasn't a set up; if he was caught out it would be a no-go. He eventually reached the hotel and asked for Josh Beecham's room number, and soon after knocked on the door of room number seventeen.

"Who is it?" It was Beecham's voice.

"It's me, it's OK," said Creek, and walked in. Josh was up and about and had water dripping from his face.

"What's up with you?" asked Creek.

"I haven't lain down on the bed, I really would go into a deep sleep. The only way of staying awake is to stand and splash my face with water every so often."

It's tough I know, but we should be OK as long as we don't lie down."

The pair stood, alternating from one aching foot to the other, and even looked out of the window for anything to distract them from their tiredness, but they didn't lie down. The unlikely pair without proper sleep for many hours, continued to stay awake on only an outside chance that someone may have fallen for their deception.

Thirty minutes later there was a knock on the door. . .

36

The Mist finally Clears

UPON HEARING THE LOUD repeated knocking on the door, both Ezekiel Creek and Josh Beecham decided to hide. Ezekiel ran behind the wardrobe and Josh darted underneath the bed.

There were several more knocks, and a tall, slightly stooped, middle aged man with a thinning mop of untidy grey hair came into the room.

In his hiding place, Ezekiel Creek was fuming. There had been a mistake and he hadn't made it. Josh Beecham was supposed to be in a deep sleep, exhausted. Instead, in the excitement, he had scrambled underneath the bed.

Ezekiel was literally and metaphorically thinking on his feet. He did not like the idea of winging it, but Josh had left him no option. However, things took a surprising turn, and it was something for which even the quick thinking Ezekiel could not possibly have made provision for.

"Hello! Beechy Bonce? Are you here? I need to speak to you urgently, there is absolute mayhem. We've got to go back to the school straightaway."

Both recognised the voice immediately, but what do they do? Each knew they could not consult with the other, so whatever each of them did, if anything, might contradict what the other might do.

Ezekiel Creek took the initiative, a gamble, as he was not the one called. He stepped out from behind the wardrobe.

"Mr Gripweed?! What on earth has been going on?! We – er – I heard that you had disappeared from the school a few hours ago. What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story but I'll tell you later. Right now, we've got to get back to Hemlock Hall, absolute madness there, chaos. And by the way you were about to say we. Who else is here? Beechy Bonce, is it?"

"Yes, I'm here, and don't call me that again!" said Josh, coming out from beneath the bed.

"That's yer nickname, innit?! Beech? Tree? Wood? You're as thick as two short planks – Beechy Bonce!"

"That is not my nickname and you know it!" insisted Josh, who was taken by surprise by this, as under normal circumstances Harry Gripweed was one of his closest friends, but he couldn't dwell on such things at that moment. Regarding his nickname, Josh knew full well it was what many people called him, whether unwittingly or in jest, but more often with malice, but he preferred to deny it rather than admit he hated it.

"Beecham! Leave it! There's no time. Right, Harry, we are not going anywhere until we hear what happened to you. Out with it, man!" demanded

Ezekiel.

"If yer insist, but don't blame me if the boss is furious we didn't get straight off.

"Anyow', I was fillin' the 'Orti-cauldron as usual, and these men grab me from behind 'n' puts a sack over me 'ead. Next fing is, I'm in some caravan – Borth or somewhere, just along the cliffs from here."

"How do you know all this, if you couldn't see most of the time?" again demanded Ezekiel.

"I was comin' to that! Jus' 'ang on. Nex' fing is, there's dogs barkin', sniffin' dogs, actually. Then a load o' WSS types burst in with battle-wands an' 'as a ding-dong wiv the geezers 'oldin' me, but it didn' go well, see. These geezers, they 'ad battle-wands, too. As there were more of 'em than the WSS blokes, loads of 'em were killed, stone dead, but luckily the two WSS lads still alive fought on an' finally managed to take out the rest o' these geezers. Any'ow, after explainin' where we was and 'ow to get 'ere along the beach an' over the cliffs, one of 'em' tells me to make me way 'ere to get you two an' go 'ome."

"And how did you manage to speak to Professor Winch?"

"He came through on his Telethingy! 'Ow d'ya think?! I don' like them things, never 'ave. Could be on the carzy or anyfink!"

Both Ezekiel and Josh smiled at one of the drawbacks of the occasionally intrusive telemagickeraph, but Ezekiel was soon straight-faced again.

"And what of the WSS now?"

"They's been regroupin', gettin' more men an' such, and goin' onto Carmarthen."

"What's going on there?" demanded Josh.

"'Ow the 'eck should I know?! I'se jus' the poor fella who gets kidnapped!"

"And how did Professor Winch say we were to get home?" asked Ezekiel.

"He said that all three of us should go to the nearest telemagickeraph, report in, and then get 'ome as best we can."

Ezekiel paused for a moment to think. "Jones's office, I think. Agreed?"

"I'm not certain of anything, Creek, but we might as well," replied Josh. He turned to his usually good friend, Harry Gripweed. "Sorry about this, Harry, but we can't take any chances. Right, Creek, you in front, me behind, with Mr Gripweed in the middle."

"Righto."

With Harry kept in the middle of the two spy-catchers at all times, they walked out of the hotel and back down to Principal Jones' office.

They walked in and found Jones just standing there, staring around the room.

"What on earth has gone on here?!" said Ezekiel, as he surveyed the sight: a wrecked office, smashed furniture and worst of all, a wrecked telemagickeraph.

"I was hoping you would be able to tell me," replied Principal Jones, "the meeting ended at ten. I went off to see Professor Harkins, came back, and

my office was like this!"

Both Ezekiel and Josh looked at each other as if to say, that figures. They also looked suspiciously at Harry, but knew it was too early to make any accusations, but Harry saw the looks.

"'Ere! Don't look at me like that! Noffink t'do with me!"

"I'm afraid we can't be of any help to you at the moment, Jones, we've things to do. Come on, Beecham, let's try the library," said Ezekiel.

Once again in crocodile fashion the three began the short trip to the library. As they walked along, Josh suddenly began to sniff with a quizzical look on his face. Josh eventually stopped sniffing and his startled countenance gave off a sign of recognition.

"Stop a moment would you, Creek."

"Whatever for?" replied Ezekiel, but he stopped nevertheless. Josh took out his wand and stood in front of Harry.

'REVERSO PRIORA IMAGO!'

The person pretending to be Harry Gripweed, caretaker of Hemlock Hall, slowly changed into another person entirely.

The thin, bony frame filled out, revealing a much younger man. He was fat in form, had greasy unkempt hair, ruddy cheeks and a large red nose. Contradicting these features was a very smart, long black wizard's robe, this was of the type worn mostly by senior members of staff at the University of Abracadrystwyth.

"By Merlin's whiskers! Who are you if you are not Harry Gripweed?!" demanded Ezekiel.

The former Harry Gripweed who had transformed in to a well-dressed chubby fellow who needed his hair washing, just stood there with his head bowed, but said nothing.

"I think I can tell you that. Just give me a second, Creek," said Josh. He frisked the man and eventually pulled out a small crystal, shaped like the University of Abracadrystwyth. Josh studied the writing alongside the crystal. It read:

'Book Procurement Office. Hector Jibb'

"Professor Ezekiel Creek, allow me to introduce you to Hector Jibb – Senior Book Procurement Officer of the University of Abracadrystwyth – and more recently, a thief, a liar, and a person who has put the whole world in peril!"

"My My!" exclaimed a jubilant Ezekiel Creek, forgetting that Josh Beecham was his worst enemy. "We've got our man! Well done, Beecham! How could you tell?!"

"One word, Creek – sprunchfetter."

"Sprunchfetter! What exactly is sprunchfetter?"

"Pull up a sandbag and old Josh will tell you all about it!" said an equally

jubilant Josh, who also momentarily forgot that he was talking to his arch enemy.

"Er – yes, please do," said Ezekiel Creek, hastily returning to normal.

"Sprunchfetter," began Josh, "is a rare herb. It grows only in the more remote parts of Romania. More importantly it is one of the main ingredients for a powerful combination of both Magic-Fusion and Restorative Magic; I don't mean for ailments or illnesses but for helping one person to look like someone else, but just as importantly to ensure successful restoration. Sounds simple, doesn't it?"

Ezekiel gave a vague nod and shake of his head, as he didn't know how to reply.

"But it isn't," continued Josh Beecham, "this is a very – erm. . . " Josh Beecham suddenly realised they had attracted an audience, and an unwelcome one at that. It was not surprising as they were in the passageway connecting various lecture rooms.

"Yes, can we help you?" sneered Ezekiel Creek. The assembly of Under-Wizards thought it best to attend their lecture on Levitation after all.

"Let's contact Professor Winch first and then go back to my room, I'll explain it properly there," suggested Josh.

"Hmmmm," said Ezekiel, having an afterthought, "we'll be lucky." They walked into the library to find the receptionist in tears.

"What is wrong, Madam?" asked Ezekiel, and not too gently considering how upset she was.

"Oh sirs! We've been tricked by a vandal! A man turned up dressed from head to toe in protective robes, said he was from the Urban Wolf-Whale Protection Squad, and asked would I kindly clear the library. He said there was one such beast loose in the Mystery section and that he would deal with it. A few minutes later he came out with a sack containing some horrible, snarling creature and said everything's fine, but look!"

The visitors looked around. Ezekiel Creek gave a fateful nod, he was not in the least surprised. The reception area was as badly smashed up as Jones' office, including of course, the telemagickeraph. This was no load of old tosh, it really was compromised.

"And look what that beast did to these ancient seashells!" moaned the receptionist. Ezekiel coughed, and Josh went red.

"I'm awfully sorry, Madam, but we only came here to – er – read, but it can wait. Please go to see the Principal right away, he may be able to sort things out."

Ezekiel Creek stopped spouting useless sympathies and suggestions as Josh gestured for them to go.

They trooped out of the building and down Terrace Street, where they attracted quite a few funny stares owing to their prisoner and escort routine.

"Rag Week again?" asked old Megyn.

"Yeah, looks like it. Cops and Robbers, most probably, you know, sponsoring a student to get as far away as quickly as possible," replied old

Cosher.

"Didn't get far, then?"

"Doesn't look like it."

A few moments later, Hector Jibb was safely tied to a chair in Josh Beecham's hotel room.

"Not surprising, really. You've thought of everything, Jibb, haven't you? Or you think you have! Right, Creek, this is what I believe our silent friend has done: Jibb here, has magically broken down Mr Gripweed, that much is clear, most probably using the poor man's Horti-cauldron to do it.

"He has, I'm sure, used a combined Magic-Fusion and Restorative Magic spell, of which sprunchfetter is a vital part. First, he will have had to put just one drop of Harry in potion form into a cauldron, this is to ensure that only the outer layer of Mr Gripweed, so to speak, basically his appearance and his voice, is restored, but in this case onto another person.

"He will then have added two drops of the liquefied sprunchfetter, or one fresh leaf from the sprunchfetter plant. This is all boiled together in the cauldron, drained off and left to cool down. The Magic-Fusion spell will then have been performed and then Jibb will have drunk the potion. After a few moments, Hector Jibb becomes Harry Gripweed.

"The sprunchfetter is vital as it gathers strength over time, reversing its fusion properties, fights against the guest potion, and the original person is fully restored. Without it, our friend here will have looked like old Harry for the rest of his life. Not a happy prospect that, is it, Mr Jibb? Obviously, Jibb didn't count on anyone around here knowing about sprunchfetter, especially its unique aroma through it being boiled in a cauldron. As brilliant as this type of magic is, it has one drawback – it leaves a unique smell. It's not that strong but once you've smelled it you never forget it."

Creek was astounded.

"You are either exceptionally clever, Beecham, or very lucky. You may have been in Romania recently, but you are not a potions expert. How did you discover its magic qualities?"

"I didn't, not on my own, but a villager knew all about it. I fixed a few things around his cottage, repaired his fence and porch and so on. The poor man insisted on my being paid, and so he told me all about sprunchfetter, where it grew, what it could be used for and how to do it."

"And then he paid you?"

"Don't be mean, Creek."

"Only joking. One thing puzzles me, though, this is all very complicated stuff so why didn't Jibb just use a Reflecto spell?"

"Good question, to which there is an equally good answer – PVP."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Portable Victim potion. You are forgetting the usefulness in having the chosen victim in bottle form, for quick getaways and travelling around in general. Reflecto spells limits your options and that's why a potionised and bottled person is also known as PVP. I would have thought you'd have at

least known that, Creek."

"I took my Wizard Degree in Magic, not Kidnapping. You might as well ask the fellow who invented the jam-jar did he invent it so he could throw them at people instead of just storing jam!"

"Er – yes, OK. The thing for us now, is to get our caretaker back. That little trick before was just an Emergency Field spell, but it does have some minor side effects, but I think I know how to complete the reversal."

"How?"

"Come on, Creek! Even you should know this! When a person has been potionised what has to happen to the bottle for safe long-term storage?"

"Deep frozen! Like in the ice garden at Hemlock Hall! But as far as I know, there isn't an ice garden here."

"No, but if you kept up with ordinary science you would know that the university has a cryogenic facility. That's the only place round here that can maintain the very low temperature required. I bet you that's where he's stored poor old Harry. Isn't that right, Jibb?! No good just keeping schtum, you've been rumbled, mate!"

Hector Jibb did not rise to the bait, gave no indication of being rumbled, and continued to remain silent with his head bowed.

"Er – Beecham, don't get too carried away. How on earth are we going to get into this place? It's part of the ordinary university, not ours."

"I know!" exclaimed Josh Beecham. "We'll find two wizards, and we'll ask them if they would kindly make us all invisible for a few hours! How do you think?!"

"You've made your point. Your wand or mine?"

Thirty minutes later, Creek, Beecham and Jibb strode past old Billy Evans the security guard.

The guard carried on reading his paper and eating his lunch, as no-one was ever likely to want to break into the Cryogenic Facility of the University of Aberystwyth. Although it would be even more of a shock if someone ever wanted to break out.

"This is a big place, Beecham, how do we know where to begin?" asked Creek.

"Er – perhaps where it says – *'Bottle Storage Facility'* – just to your left there? It might, just might, give us a clue where to look."

"Any more sarcasm, Beecham, and I'll give you a thick ear!"

"Aair Bejabers! Yer will now, will yer?!" said Josh, as an embarrassing reminder of Creek's seventeen second boxing match with a long dead Irish concert promoter.

A blushing Creek said nothing more.

"This will do as our start point," said Josh.

They were right in front of a large storage facility where hundreds of bottles of many different sizes were kept deep frozen in cryogenic containers.

"OK, now for Jibb." He took his wand and pointed it at Hector Jibb.

'SUSPENDIUM RIGITATO!'

Jibb just stood there rooted to the spot, motionless. Josh Beecham quickly lost his chirpiness.

"Sorry for the sarcasm, Creek, I may have spoken too soon. I am at a loss as to how we can search quickly. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of bottles here, I don't know how long it will take to find Harry."

"Perhaps quicker than you think, Beecham, look here."

Josh walked over to where Creek was now studying a little machine at the front of the storage area. It had dials, buttons, numbers and letters.

Creek continued:

"I may know ordinary science better than you realise, Beecham. Ordinary folk like nothing better than using alphabetical order, or perhaps some sort of alpha-numeric sequence or even a simple code word when storing things. It looks like this little gizmo here is a retrieval system for stored bottles. It's my guess that this is not optional but mandatory, so Jibb will have to have given his bottle of Harry some sort of name or serial number. If we can work out what it is, we can retrieve it."

"I think you're right, Creek, but you've forgotten one thing. Jibb could have used absolutely anything as a name or number for the bottle. This in itself could still take us hours, weeks!"

"Hmmm, perhaps, but. . ."

With a mystified Josh watching his every move, Creek went up to the still rigid form of Hector Jibb, and placed his wand on his neck. "*Revellimus mnemonium vocatis, expende organo enchantium*," he whispered. From out of thin air, misty yellow rings surrounded Jibb's head and neck, humming and glowing. Creek waited . . . and waited . . . and waited, until. . . "Clever boy." Creek removed his wand; the circular light show stopped and vanished. He turned to Josh. "Well, that didn't work, there's so much protection in his noddle it would take months to break him. I could wake him and try something else, but we can't risk losing him. Nope, it's as we were, we'll just have to crack on."

Josh was going to ask Creek to qualify losing him, but thought better of it.

Creek continued: "It was worth a try still, never mind, but if Jibb here was confident of not being caught, then he's probably called it the same name as what was on the bottle after breaking Mr Gripweed down in the Horti-cauldron. Come on, Beecham. Think man, think!"

"Well, I've not seen the Horti-cauldron in use very often. How does it know what it's breaking down, and how does it decide what to put on the label?" said Josh.

"Much of it is to do with the Magic Laws of the Cosmos, I'm in the dark over stuff like that myself. However, I suspect the labeller is passed information from the core on the origin of the subject. It predominantly uses the suffix Weed for inferior vegetation, the prefix Poly for combinations, and mostly but not always – Wort – for higher forms – either as a suffix or prefix.

Of course, the weed in Harry's surname might confuse things and gum up the works, but if I had to guess, I'd say it was something Wort, or Wort something. Without wanting to sound elitist, Harry isn't very bright, is he? For all I know, it may have decided he was a weed."

"Hmmm – maybe, but I've just had a thought. My guess is the Horti-cauldron will have recognised Harry as being of a higher form biologically, which, in some ways has nothing to do with intelligence or abstract reasoning – or the lack of it. I think you were right when you said it's probably Wort, let's try that."

Creek and Josh took turns inputting various combinations into the machine, each with the word, Wort, at the beginning or end. All sorts of nonsensical suggestions were met with the digital display:

'IDENTITY TAG NOT RECOGNISED –
PLEASE RESUBMIT CORRECT IDENTITY TAG.'

Josh Beecham, exasperated and almost giving up hope, suddenly saw the screen change and thought he had finally cracked it. The digital display proclaimed:

'IDENTITY TAG RECOGNISED: PRESS R FOR RETRIEVAL.'

Josh did this and the storage facility burst into life. Huge stainless steel drums span round, moved along, and then stopped with a whooshing sound. A lid opened up on one of the drums which then belched out ice-fumes.

A huge bottle, far bigger than either of them had expected it to be, was raised by an electronic arm which then stretched out and was within reach.

Josh retrieved the bottle. "Yucky, yuck, yucky!"

"What is it, Beecham?! Is it Harry?!"

Josh read the label in full. Firstly, the name on the bottle:

'GRIPPY'

Then a more personal message below:

'OH, MY DARLING GRIPPY.
YOU GAVE ME MANY YEARS OF JOY.
YOUR BASKET AND BOWL WILL BE WAITING
HERE FOR YOU UNTIL THE DAY WE ARE REUNITED.
AU REVOIR.
YOUR LOVING MUMSY.'

Josh showed Creek.

"Ugh! A cat! You could have told me, you were like a madman on that machine. Lord knows what you entered instead of Gripwort, or whatever."

They both stopped dead in their tracks. At exactly the same time. . .

"GRIPWORT!"

"Go on, Beecham! Try it!"

Josh replaced poor Grippy in the scoop of the electronic arm, pressed the storage button, and away he went. Once everything had settled down again, he slowly and carefully typed in *'GRIPWORT'*.

Finally. . .

'IDENTITY TAG RECOGNISED: PRESS R FOR RETRIEVAL.'

A minute or so later, Josh Beecham was holding a bottle of Gripwort, complete with a picture of a smiling Harry Gripweed, brandishing his mop and bucket.

Professor Creek had one further doubt despite the to-ing and fro-ing of inspiration from both of them which had got them this far.

"We may have the poor fellow in bottle form, but just how do we restore him properly?" he asked Josh.

"Easy. Fogblocker," replied Josh.

"Fogblocker? What's this all about? Some crackpot Romanian villager got you to fix his thatched roof and paid you in kind with some load of hooey?!"

"If it wasn't for that Romanian villager we wouldn't have Jibb – would we? And it's nothing to do with Romania."

"But where did you learn this Fogblocker business?"

"Bulgaria."

"Big difference!"

"Can we crack on, please? Fogblocker is an alternative form of Restorative Magic. Safer than the Emergency Field spell I did earlier, and usually without any loss to the subject or in this case, the victim, although I hope Harry doesn't blame me if we're too late.

"When the Fogblocker spell is performed, a huge fog builds up in the bottle, streams out, fills up the immediate area, and it is at this point that the person who has been potionised returns to their original form. By the way, make sure that Harry's lid is off when we do this, otherwise it won't work. And don't be alarmed when you see the fog, it will cover the whole of this storage facility but it's harmless."

"Let's crack on and try it, then. I've had enough of this place."

"Right you are. Just give Jibb a prod there, will you? We'll need to make sure he's still rigid. Can't have him escaping in the fog."

Creek unkindly poked Jibb in the stomach and back with his wand.

Apart from an enforced gasp at each prod, Jibb was still as stiff as a board.

"He'll do. Fire away! Well – Fog away!"

Josh placed the bottle on a ledge next to the retrieval machine, took the lid off, stood back and raised his wand. He then performed the Fogblocker spell:

'ESSENCIO FLUIDATO REGULATUM PHYSIATO IN TOTO RESTORATIS!'

The contents of the bottle of Gripwort turned into a deep blue mist. It then poured out of the bottle, and within a minute or so the whole of the storage facility was covered in a thick blue fog. Nobody could see a thing.

"Beecham? Are you there? Is this what should be happening? Beecham!" shouted Creek.

"Easy, Creek. It will clear in a minute or so. We're perfectly safe."

Josh Beecham was true to his word. The fog eventually cleared and standing on the ledge, rather precariously balanced, was Harry Gripweed.

"Where am I? Who pushed me in the 'Orti-cauldron? Whoooooaaa! Somebody 'elp me!"

Being on a ledge was bad enough but standing on a bottle while in a daze was ten times as bad.

"Oops! Silly me, my mistake. Just hold on and I'll get you down," said Josh. Harry was helped down off the ledge.

"Fanks! Fort I was a goner there!"

"It was only three feet, Harry! I'm glad to see you are fully restored."

"I really meant being flunged in the 'Orti-cauldron."

"Of course! How stupid of me!" said Josh.

Harry noticed Professor Creek, and the strange man standing next to him who seemed very still, rigid in fact. "Oh 'ello, Professor Creek. You 'ere as well?"

"Either that or I'm a hologram! Glad to see you are unharmed, Harry, we'll soon be on our way home!" said a smiling and highly relieved Ezekiel.

"Fanks, Zeke – er – Professor Creek. Anyways, 'oo's 'e?"

"Yes, come and meet your kidnapper, but don't hit him with your mop, Professor Winch needs to talk to him."

It was just then that the spell to keep Jibb from escaping began to wear off.

"UUUuugh! Where am I?"

"Good one, Jibb. You know full well where you are. The game's up, old man. Professor Winch wants a word with you," said Creek.

"Don't forget the WSS!" added Josh.

"Wh-what are y-you talking about? Haven't you come to rescue me?" said a very mixed up Hector Jibb.

"'Ere! They came 'ere to rescue me. You's the one that pushed me in me 'Orti-cauldron! These fellers aren't daft!" shouted Harry.

"Hey! Now listen here! I was on my way to work, and next thing is I was bundled off by some ruthless thug, and the next thing I know I'm in this, this – whatever it is, with you lot! If it's not too much trouble, I would very much like to go home!"

"What do you reckon, Creek? Shall I freeze his voice-box for a few hours, that'll shut him up! Creek?"

But Ezekiel Creek wasn't listening.

A few moments earlier something had caught his eye, a little flash of light like a reflection off a mirror, or a bottle.

After a minute or so he walked back over to where Josh and Harry were still looking at Jibb in disgust. He was brandishing an empty bottle, and a piece of note paper.

"I'm sorry to inform you, gentlemen, that we've been had – good and proper! Look!"

Creek held up a bottle. It was similar to the one containing *'Gripwort'*, and had a picture of a smiling Hector Jibb with bubbles coming out of his nose, holding a bottle of Champagne. It proclaimed the contents to be: *'JIBBWEED'*.

"I don't get you, Creek. OK, he's also been potionised himself at some point for some reason, but a clever wizard could do it himself. If not, then he had an accomplice. I still think we have our man!"

"Well, I don't! And here's why!" Creek held up the note paper. It was a letter which he had found lying next to the bottle. He then read it out loud:

'Hector Jibb is innocent – I am the real thief and spy. I stole the Book of Chaotagens and I will steal the Addendum. I will probably have already done so by the time you are reading this letter. No, Mr Beecham, it is not in your coat, too risky, ha ha! Where else but in the pathetic safe in your poky hotel room! Catch me if you can. Too late, I think!

'You are wondering why I am telling you these things? It is because total victory is at hand for all followers of the real ruler of the world, Professor Zenith! I have nothing to fear from such bumblers as you two, or anyone else the Magic Council or the WFW or even the WSS foolishly sends to try and stop me. I knew that you, Beecham, would know, or more accurately, remember the secrets of sprunchfetter, you were not the only one slumming it in the Romanian countryside! But did I not tell you about the double sprunchfetter plant? How forgetful of me!

'Now, how did I do it? I was the host to the two guest potions: your Mr Gripweed, and underneath him, Hector Jibb. I knew you would find this place – there are no Ice Gardens in Abracadrystwyth! I knew you would be impatient, Beecham, and use the Fogblocker spell, and I made sure the opened bottle was near enough to release the rest of Jibb's genified self, and then made good my own escape in the fog.

'Oh, by the way, Beecham, thank you for mending my fence! And you, Creek, I knew that weak old wizard Winch would send you along for the ride. Apart from Professor Winch, you are the cleverest person at Hemlock Hall. A compliment? – No! Compared with our glorious leader, you are nothing! He is all seeing and all knowing! Victory is at hand for Professor Zenith and all who follow him. When he kicks through the ashes of your twin citadels, he will personally bring about the demise of your young friend, Michael Miller. Victory will be ours!'

Creek looked at Josh Beecham with disbelief and anger.

"You idiot, Beecham! You stupid idiot! Your bumbling – yes, yours, not mine – has probably brought about the end of the world! Get out of my sight! Find your own way back home. Better still, go back to Romania – for good!"

Josh Beecham was not in the least concerned with Creek's raging mighty rebuke, but he was very concerned with a terrible mistake he had made in befriending who he had thought to have been a perfectly decent, honourable Romanian crofter.

Josh, with his arms up, his hands placed on the cold steel and with his head bowed, leaned against the wall of the Cryogenic Facility. He shed tears at the thought of what was now likely to happen after such a catastrophic failure.

Despite all that the magic community had done to protect Mike Miller from the evil Professor Zenith, it all now seemed to be of no avail.

And then there was Krickenstaltz – a magic citadel, keeping the world alive for all peoples, about to go up in smoke and everyone in it.

And, of course — Hemlock Hall. An admirable institution which did a fine balancing act between being a proud flagship of the Magic Council's education programme, and at the same time acting as a nerve centre – its proud staff working with both the Military and WFW whenever there was a crisis emanating from the magic world.

All of this – and probably much more – would be gone, and very soon. Harry wisely kept quiet. Hector Jibb did not.

"See! I told you so! I AM INNOCENT! I WAS KIDNAPPED AND – AND PICKLED! Now get me home!"

Creek was not in the mood for taking any more nonsense.

"WILL YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH! THE WORLD DOES NOT REVOLVE AROUND YOU! IF WE DON'T DO SOMETHING AND VERY SOON, THERE WON'T BE ANY WORLD REVOLVING ANYWHERE! Now be quiet while I think!"

Creek's thoughts, as well as his shouting, were disturbed by Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph.

"Creek? Beecham? Professor Winch here. Have you located Hector Jibb and Mr Gripweed?"

"Am I glad to hear you, Headmaster. Er – yes, we have indeed, but you seem to have been expecting me to say as much. Is there something Beecham and – er – is there something that *I* should know?"

A puzzled Professor Winch hesitated for a second, and diplomatically made it a one to one call only.

"Erm – Professor Creek, is Josh Beecham still with you?"

"Yes, he is, Headmaster, but there's been a change. I am no longer prepared to work with such an amateur. His bungling over in Romania is the very reason why we are all in such terrible danger. I will explain everything properly and in full when I get back, but for now I deem it necessary to ask you to liaise with me alone, and leave Beecham out of it."

The stern Professor Winch came to the fore.

"Listen, Ezekiel, and listen well. I have no intention of leaving Josh Beecham out in the cold. If the following is true, both you and Josh have probably saved the world, not destroyed it. First – have you located either Hector Jibb or Mr Gripweed?"

"Yes, Headmaster, they are both right here, but—"

"Have both Hector and Harry been affected by Sprunchfetter spells, and Magic-Fusion?"

"Yes, Headmaster, but how—"

"Are they both back to normal and has Jibb been protesting his innocence?"

"Yes, Headmaster, but it's more than that – he is innocent!"

"I know he is."

"I beg your pardon, Headmaster! How on earth did you know that?"

"Because I have suspected the real spy for some time now."

"What?! You'll have to explain, Headmaster, you have totally lost me."

"Ezekiel, old chap, I haven't time to tell you the whole story now. However, I will give you the barest of details to ease your confusion, and hopefully end your renewed, or should I say, even greater mistrust of Josh Beecham. I knew that Jibb was innocent and I had a fair idea of who the spy was, but I didn't have any proof of this, and I certainly did not know initially who his victims would be. As for his intentions, that became clear after the Book of Chaotagens went missing and I knew he would be back for the Addendum.

"Your task has been completed, and very well, I might add. Please accept my congratulations, and pass them on to Josh. No doubt all four of you, particularly Mr Jibb and Mr Gripweed, want nothing more than to get home. Now, I've run out of time and must go. Please return to the school when you have been suitably refreshed. Goodbye for now."

"Er — er – but, Headmaster! One – er – two questions before you go, if I may?"

Professor Winch gave a big sigh.

"I must say, Ezekiel, you are getting more like young Michael every day. If you must, please, fire away."

"What of the Addendum, and the spy himself? I had assumed he'd escaped."

"You will be very pleased to hear that I have the Addendum right in front of me – and the spy, one Marco Dracov – who masqueraded as Professor Charles Husband of the University of Abracadrystwyth, is in the custody of the WSS. Goodbye, Ezekiel."

"BUT-BUT!" It was no use asking anything further, Professor Winch was gone.

Creek thought over such an amazing turn of events. He was a little angry that neither he nor Beecham had been given all the facts, but he conceded that Professor Winch must have had his reasons.

Moreover, his rage over Beecham's seeming gullibility had subsided. He

knew that he, too, would have been duped by such a clever ploy, and as Beecham had pointed out to him, he certainly did not know about sprunchfetter, single or double.

But Professor Charles Husband? Charles? Charlie! Creek suddenly realised he had met the spy. The old bumbler Charlie from the meeting. Charles, or Charlie on their own meant nothing, but – his childish nickname, 'Hubbers', from the surname, Husband!

"Bingo!" exclaimed Ezekiel, although his jubilance was immediately tempered by the realisation that his attempts earlier on to either avoid being tailed or at least know that someone had indeed been following him, had been a total failure. Marco Dracov, initially posing as Charles Husband, but who had then pushed the boundaries of magic fusion by taking on two new personas, was a spy who was, frustratingly for the powers of good, right on top of his game.

Ezekiel Creek is thought by most to be basically a good man. Whatever bad points he does have are automatically brought to the surface through his loathing of his cousin, Josh Beecham – and especially so when forced to endure his company for long periods. But on this occasion he knew his conclusions had been totally wrong, and knew he had to find a way of letting Josh know that the immediate crisis had passed, and that the magic community had made a significant gain through the capturing of a spy. He decided on his course of action, which he commenced while talking rather more loudly than normal.

"LISTEN UP, YOU TWO! BEECHAM AND I HAVE NOT HAD A DECENT MEAL FOR DAYS! WE'RE GOING TO A RESTAURANT, AND YOU'RE PAYING! I THINK THAT'S THE LEAST YOU CAN DO UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES!"

An ungrateful Hector Jibb overheard this, rubbed his ears and piped up.

"Just you listen here! Most of me has spent who knows how long, marinating in a jar! So if it's not too much trouble – all I want to do is get home, then you can go and stuff your face!"

"You'll be home soon enough, and it was a bottle!" said Ezekiel Creek with a smile. In return, Harry smiled and nodded, but not Jibb.

"I am not paying for anything!"

"Oh, is that right? Well now, *WE* – can always put *YOU* – back in here," said Ezekiel, pointing to the bottle of Jibbweed.

Harry was already counting out his money, but Jibb just gave a sickly smile.

"Sorry, jupiters and plutos only. No use round here."

"At the Dining Rooms of the University of Abracadrystwyth! Jupiters?! They'll do nicely!"

"Oh," replied Hector Jibb.

"What's with the 'we', all of a sudden, I'm finished, aren't I?" said the still despondent Josh Beecham, upon hearing the over-loud professor, particularly the affected 'we'.

The expediently fickle professor walked over and put his arms around an

astounded and confused Josh Beecham.

"Now – er – Beechy Bon – er – am! You know sometimes we have to feign emotions, and say and do things we don't mean because of the need to confuse the enemy? You know, walls have ears and suchlike. . . "

A short while later, a much relieved Josh Beecham was tucking into roast turkey, roast and boiled potatoes, gravy, carrots and cauliflower, occasionally washed down with strong lager.

A still smiling Harry had put his wallet away as it was Josh's treat, although he had made his mind up to pay for several Irish coffees for all of them later on.

"It isn't Christmas, Mr Beecham, that's turkey, isn't it?" asked a still disgruntled Hector Jibb.

"Yep!" said Josh. "Feels like Christmas to me!"

Just at that moment, Harry caught sight of himself in a mirror. "Me 'air! What's 'appened to me 'air?!"

Josh laughed, and nearly choked on a roastie. "Sorry, Harry, I forgot to tell you. By restoring who we thought to be Hector Jibb with an Emergency spell, a little of your essence vanished into thin air. When this happens, the person, once properly restored, loses some minor feature; with you it was your hair, what little you had left of it, anyway. Sorry."

"Sorry?! Minor feature?! I've been baldified against me will, 'n' all you can do is say sorry?!"

"Hey, Harry! Keep your hair on! Oops! Too late!" said the wickedly witty Ezekiel Creek.

A soon again smiling but shiny bonced Harry Gripweed, still bought round after round of Irish coffees.

37

Don't Pass Joe

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL, boredom was rarely a problem for the good folks of Krickenstaltz, and in most instances this was also the case for its more temporary residents and visitors such as Mike Miller, but today was far from being equal.

Two days after the hilarious trip to Blackpool and his introduction to the Blackpool Right-Angle, Mike was sitting in Vince's bedroom with the siblings, discussing what they were going to do for the day, that was until word came up from the masters of Krickenstaltz that due to routine monthly maintenance followed by a bi-annual update of the magic systems which powered and controlled all magic travel, all routine or leisure journeys which would have been facilitated by TMGs were suspended for eight hours. That was straight after breakfast; just before lunch a further message came through that due to a hitch the systems would be down by around twenty-four hours. The children were later to learn that this was all due to one highly embarrassing gaff. The person most affected by this howler, committed deep in the bowels of Krickenstaltz, was poor Gregor Ojstott. He had been taking a bath on the paradise isle of Mauritius – then he wasn't. After realising something had gone wrong, Gregor stood and bowed, and left the stage of the Theatre Royal rather quickly. The entire theatre stood and gave him a standing ovation and were still clapping when Gregor, now dressed as Marc Antony courtesy of a spare costume found in the wings, was out on Drury Lane, desperately trying to get his TMG to work.

"Great, what do we do now?" said the disconsolate Vincent.

"We can go outs—" went to say Juliette, but stopped upon seeing and hearing the hail, wind and rain battering the windows. The light inside the citadel, so gloomy at the best of times was far worse on a bad day like today.

"Don't you have any board games here, then? I used to play Scrabble with Mum and Dad when I was bored."

Juliette went into thoughtful mode. "Well . . . there's . . . Your – er . . . hmmm . . . no, on second thoughts, best not."

"Best not what?" asked a mystified Mike.

"Yeah! Why not?!" enthused Vincent.

"OK!" squealed Juliette. "You're on!"

"Erm – would anyone care to tell me what on earth you are on about?" said the still in the dark Mike.

"It's a game, Mike, the only one allowed here. Even then Dad swears he's going to get it chopped, but he's never gone that far yet. It's sort of a board

game but not really, not once you get started."

Mike, none the wiser, turned to Juliette instead. "What's it called then? What do we do?"

"Run, as fast as you can usually . . . you'll soon see. The thing is, the game was never really completed as the person who invented it, some really old wizard named Erstwhile Gumbo, died before he finished it. But that's part of the fun . . . er . . . not him dying of course, but not really knowing the point of the game or even when it's over, most of the time. Other inventor-wizards stepped in and adjusted things so you just had to raise your right arm, clench your fist and shout 'Finish!' when you've had enough. You might win occasionally, it just depends."

"What's it called then?" repeated Mike.

"That's another thing, it doesn't even have a proper name, but old Gumbo narrowed it down to three possibilities before he died, so some call it *'Your Worst Nightmare'*, others call it *'Trolls and Scrolls'*, and a few call it *'Don't Pass Joe'*. Odd I know, but there it is," said Juliette.

"*Don't pass Joe*?! Are you two havin' me on 'ere?!" exclaimed Mike but with a generous chuckle in his voice.

"Nope, not at all!" said Vincent, "Come on, we'll show you." Vincent led the way.

With Juliette and Mike following, they went down the corridor and down the staircase.

When they reached the ground floor, Vincent led them on down the hallway to the rear of the staircase, then it was down another staircase, then another, and then in almost pitch darkness down one last but very dirty, grimy staircase, and then along a narrow stone passageway, just big and wide enough for them to move along in single file. Thankfully this was lit by the odd fire-torch here and there. At the end of the corridor was a small wooden door, quite rotten and without any locks or bolts. Vincent simply pushed it open, they were in. . .

Mike was staggered by what he saw, even more than when he had first walked into the noisy dining room with light dazzling in through the large windows.

Mike now found himself in what looked like a huge aircraft hangar. It was so vast that the eyes simply ran out of long-distance-vision making it impossible to discern either the magnitude of its tarmac covered length or breadth, and leaving one to only guess if it did comply with the usual rules of physics and actually have all three standard dimensions.

Seeing as the further reaches of the hangar, if that's what it was, formed a strange industrial horizon, this left the tarmac they stood on and the dirty white ceiling as the only things acting as any sort of spatial anchor. The ceiling was far, far above them way up high in the biggest enclosed space the children had ever stood in, but it was not so high as to be beyond normal vision.

The area was dimly lit, but the source of such an eerie twilight was not

obvious to Mike and the siblings.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" asked Mike. "Thought you said it was some sort of board game?"

"It is at first, but then – er – it isn't."

"That's really helpful that, cheers," said Mike, not sure whether to smile or frown. This was at exactly the same time as he stumbled upon something hard lying on the floor. He was certain that it had not been there before as he had scanned the tarmac only seconds earlier, looking for clues as to whether there really was a game to be played or if the siblings were just winding him up so as to waste time. Mike bent down and picked the object up. It was made of iron and at first Mike thought it was just a twisted piece of scrap, but on closer inspection he saw it was a wrought iron figure six.

"What the 'eck's this, then?" asked Mike, holding the iron six up so the siblings could see.

"Thought you'd know, Mike. I heard that non-magic games always start by trying to throw a figure six. It's just the same here, we start our games by throwing a six as well." explained Vincent.

"But that's for when you use di—" Mike started to say, but then he just gave up. "OK, fine. Shall we start, then?"

"Yes, why not," said Juliette. "On three?"

Mike and Vincent nodded and held up their sixes ready to throw. "One! Two! Three!"

The wrought iron sixes were thrown as far as they would go down the length of the vast hangar. As the first of the clangs and echoes gave the three mild earache, the hangar went black. Mike could not even see his hand in front of his face, but just as the last echo died away, the light returned and it was much stronger than before.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Mike. He was right outside of his own home back in Barnswick, and the light, and heat, was from the warm sun of summer.

Mike now realised that if this was a game, then it was not a multi-player game. Vincent and Juliette were no longer with him. "The crafty devils!" he added, thinking that the siblings, perhaps aided by Ernst, had found a way for him to make a visit home to ease the worry and even the boredom. "Or perhaps I am home for good," he said to himself as he opened the little garden gate, walked up the front path and knocked on the front door.

The front door opened . . .

Mike stood there dumbfounded as his father, mother, aunts and uncles, cousins, his grandfather, his grandmother, all of the staff from school and even the Prime Minister of Great Britain piled out of the hallway, onto the porch and struck up a song of celebration. . .

'FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW! FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW!
FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FE-EL-LOW! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!
WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!

FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FE-EL-LOW! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!'

"Blinkin' 'eck!" began Mike, "How did you know I was coming hom—" but Mike's returning home speech would have to wait a while longer.

'—MIKE IS BACK HOME IN BARNSWICK!
MIKE IS BACK HOME IN BARNSWICK!
MIKE IS BACK HOME IN BAR-NS-WICK! - WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!
WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!
MIKE IS BACK HOME IN BAR-NS-WICK! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!'

"Thanks everyone, you don't know how much this mea—"

'—MIKE IS OUR BEST EVER STUDENT! MIKE IS OUR BEST EVER STUDENT!
MIKE IS OUR BEST EVER STU-U-DENT! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!
WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!
MIKE IS OUR BEST EVER STU-U-DENT! AND SO SAY ALL OF US!'

This verse was seemingly led by Professors Winch and Creek, who could never bring themselves to stick entirely to the all-US lyrics. The rest duly joined in.

"Aah, now . . . come on—" went to say Mike but with a blush, even though he was delighted to hear it, but. . .

'—MICHAEL FANCIES HIS TEACHER! MICHAEL FANCIES HIS TEACHER!
MICHAEL FANCIES HIS TE-EA-CHER! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!
WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!
MICHAEL FANCIES HIS TE-EA-CHER! WHICH NOBODY CAN DENY!'

—mocked his smiling mother as she led the manic doorstep gathering in another stanza of this now embarrassing ditty.

"Now that was a secre—"

'—MIKE'S ABOUT TO GET EATEN! (struck up his grandfather).
MIKE'S ABOUT TO GET EATEN! MIKE'S ABOUT TO GET EA-EA-TEN!
I BAGSY HIS BUM AND HIS THIGH! I BAGSY HIS BUM AND HIS THIGH!
I BAGSY HIS BUM AND HIS THH-HIGGHHHHHAAARRRGGRRRRRRRR-
RRRRRRRRRRYAAAOWWWLLGRRRRRRRR. . . '

Mike's thoughts were rapid and jumbled. At first, he was going to lift a shaky finger to his late grandfather and remind him that he was supposed to be long dead, but the sudden change in the (mostly) cheery lyrics to words akin to a pre-feast herald, with Mike as the main course, left Mike no option but to say. . .

"Oooh 'eck! I'm off!" and off he ran, just as the supposed gathering of

family and other familiar folks on the doorstep changed into huge, ugly, foul-smelling creatures, monsters to be precise, led by granddad Ogre, still keeping up the refrain and still regaling the company with the object of his next snack.

Mike ran and ran: down Lochinvar street, left onto Kenilworth Street; he cut through Ivanhoe Place and onto Canal Street. Mike looked around. The whole mob were not only close still, but were almost upon him. Mr Miller the bloody-jowelled werewolf slashed at Mike with his razor sharp talons. Mummy the mummy, with her mouth now a featureless uniform gap in her head-shroud letting out a cross between a low pitch burp and a ghostly fog horn, reached out to try and grab Mike around the neck.

The rest of the murderous crew were shouting the most obscene things, all centring on what they would do to Mike – while he was still alive – while he was dying – and once he was dead. . .

Mike caught sight of Donaldo, just leaving his house with his footy kit on and with his boots slung over his shoulder.

"Donaldo! Help! Help! Save me! Save me!" yelled Mike, ten yards from his gate.

"Promise to let Brazil win all of our games from now on?" replied Donaldo with a smirk.

"Yeah! 'Course! Anything! I'll let 'em all in, the lot! Just help me! Please! They're going to kill me and, and. . . "

Mike just couldn't bring himself to say what he thought was indeed going to happen to him – mind you, this bit was likely to be post-mortem, so that was rather academic from Mike's point of view.

Mike was only feet away from Donaldo.

"Nah! They can have yer. Tata me ole mucker!" shouted Donaldo with a wicked grin as Mike now sped past, still with the murderous mob on his tail.

Mike thought desperately as to what he could do to save himself. Suddenly, out of the chaotic fog of desperate thoughts, an image of the silent film hero Charlie Chaplin popped into his mind. He visualized Charlie making a desperate and yet comic escape from many pursuers down a suburban Los Angeles street – bingo!

Mike reached the junction with Rokeby Street; he slowed a little, hoping this in itself would disrupt the momentum of his pursuers. Thankfully this seemed to work with the mob colliding and almost collapsing in a heap at having to also slow down.

Mike sped up again and shot right onto Rokeby Street, just as the mob had recovered both composure and speed, but as they all also turned right to continue the chase, Mike sped past them all in the opposite direction. It had worked – Mike had opened up a possibly life-saving gap between himself and his would-be slashers and devourers.

Mike reached the park. Could he finally find some much needed help here?

He ran through the gates, along the path past the duck-pond and up towards the large field that was so familiar to him. Yes! There were his

beloved Bedazzlers!

"Hey! Lads! Help! Help! They're after me! Help!"

Greasy and Sweaty stopped dead in their tracks. Noel Marchment, who was about to make the save of the decade, also stopped, and as the ball flew past him he, too, looked across to see the terrified Mike rushing up with a mob of baying monsters in pursuit.

The mob had once again rapidly narrowed Mike's lead.

"No probs, Mike," shouted Greasy, "that's it, Mike, come on now, reach the safety of the pitch, that's it! We're all safe here, all the lads are here to help. Come on, you can do it, Mike . . . a little closer, just a little more! Come on now, Mike, come on, that's it, almost there, just a little bit morEAAAAA-GGHHHGRRRRRRRRRR! KILL MIKE MILLER!" yelled Eric the sweaty troll while Graham the greasy gremlin uttered something similar, as did Noah the axe murderer.

"BLOODY HELL!" swore Mike. He veered back onto the path and decided to leave the park via the Woodstock Street gate, the diametric opposite to the entrance and exit he normally used.

Upon reaching the gate he found that it was surrounded by all of his school mates from Hemlock Hall, not just his close friends but Tobias and his own little gang and others from every year, each and every one now turned into something from the place no-one mentions, each roaring and shouting obscenities as Mike got nearer.

Although Sarah, Luke and Hyacinth from Tobias's mob had morphed into the type of bloodthirsty monsters that were already on Mike's tail, Tobias's unearthly doppelganger was more obscene than gory. He had grown bigger, taller and fatter, so fat that his stomach seemed to declare itself an out-of-shirt colony or dependency, breaking away from Home Rule.

With the Barnswick Beelzebubs to the rear and with the Hemlock Harpies and more to his front, Mike stopped and gulped as Tobias's disgustingly bare ginormous stomach formed a mouth of its own, and which squelched open and flopped and quivered with a slimy WVLOPP-OPP-BOPP as it closed again, while stretching over towards Mike as if feeling for its next meal.

"I wish this game was over!" yelled Mike, supposedly to himself but so loud it disturbed the ducks in the nearby pond.

"A HA!" Mike suddenly yelled. He had recalled Juliette saying how to end the game. He went to raise his right arm and clench his fist and shout "Finish!" but before he could do so, he was suddenly covered in strong wire netting. The park keeper now turned ghostly blood-covered demonic gladiator had thrown the net straight over him, leaving his usual afternoon task of watering the dahlias.

Mike struggled on, dragging the net with him. He looked all around in desperation and was relieved see another of the usual park keepers, Joe Dylan, over to his right, manning the little gate house to the side of the third and final exit from the park.

Joe was egging Mike on to reach the hopefully safe haven of Durward

Avenue.

"Come on, Mike, they're aliens, they've been here weeks!" Joe shouted. "But they can't go onto Durward Avenue, the boffins have sprayed it with DDT, it's poisonous to them!"

Mike breathed a sigh of relief, even though the baying mob were again almost upon him, but Mike thought he could just about make it. He struggled onwards towards Joe, who was still egging him on.

"Come on, Mike, I'll hold them off while you make it to safety." But something else Juliette had said also came to Mike's mind – '. . . and a few call it, *'Don't Pass Joe'*. Odd I know, but there it is. . .'

'Don't Pass Joe', groaned Mike to himself as he realised that Joe Dylan's shouts for Mike to make it to the gate and beyond were no doubt a trap. "I've had it, that's it. May as well get this over with," added the now maudlin Mike Miller.

Mike stopped his pointless escape attempt and turned and slanked to his knees. He thought if he didn't struggle, then the end would be quicker and less painful than it would be through putting up a heroic but futile struggle. He looked on as the Devil's army raced up and were only a hair's breadth from their next meal and Mike's demise, both of which were inextricably linked.

Mike bowed his head in resignation; no sooner had he done so than everywhere went black all around him. . . But – the light returned, although far dimmer than the summer sun of Barnswick.

He was back in the hangar, on his feet as he was before he threw the six, and what's more he felt fine and dandy as if he'd been on the sundeck of the Royal Yacht Brittania while anchored off Nassau.

Mike just blinked and looked around, but then came a very welcome, very familiar voice.

"Well, what d'yer reckon?!" yelled Vincent, who, Mike assumed, had only just arrived back himself, that is, if he had been anywhere in the first place.

"That was . . . that was . . . THE BEST GAME I'VE EVER PLAYED!" said Mike, once he had weighed up the fact that it was indeed a game, and a perfectly safe one at that. "I was at home, or thought I was. Everyone I knew became a monster and came after me! I was terrified!"

"I know, Mike, it's the same for everyone, and the first time you play it is always the best."

"Why's that, then?"

"Weeell. . . " began Vincent, rather reluctantly. "Once you've played it a few times, you work out how to win, it's not so good then, but everyone loses when they first play it. It sounds silly to say so, but that's probably why you liked it so much."

"Lose?" said Mike. "Did I lose, then?" he added, now not sure at all if he had won or lost the game.

"Yeah, once you've raised your arm or gone past Joe, you've lost. Then it's straight to jail – Alcatraz, where you get to share a cell with Al Capone and

play the harmonica, but you know that now anyway," replied Vincent.

"Doesn't matter though, does it, Mike? It's the chase which is the fun . . . I think." said an uncertain sounding Juliette.

"Alcatraz?! Blimey, I didn't end up there, I wish I had have done now! No – I didn't raise my arm, I couldn't. I was going to go past Joe, though, but remembered at the last second. I know it sounds daft but I really thought it was all for real and that I was done for. I just gave in expecting the worst, then found myself back here."

"Blimey! You've won, mate!" exclaimed Vincent. "It took me ten goes before I had the nerve to try that. I wasn't sure it was all pretend either."

"Yes, well done, Mike. I did better than scaredy cat here, but it still took me a few goes before I won."

"How many goes exactly?" enquired Mike.

"Hmmm. Mimble mimble blibber times" very quietly replied Juliette. Mike smiled, and then decided on a face saver.

"What happened to you two, then? Everyone from here chase you around the place?"

"Nah. Well, yeah, but probably not in the same way, that seems to be just the first time. This time I had to face thousands of screaming, spotty geeks at a graduation ceremony after getting a First in seven different degrees at Oxford. I tried to explain they'd made a mistake, but I was told not to indulge in false modesty. So I had to stand there in a rotten cap and gown, had to listen to the Secretary of the UN tell everyone how good I was, then I got buried under a pile of scrolls and struggled off the rostrum. I thought that was it, but a gang of eighteen year old girls from the PPE course burst into the changing rooms, and they chased me right along Oxford High Street, trouble was, I was in my undies."

"Why didn't you raise your arm?" asked Mike with a chuckle.

"I tried to but I was still carrying the scrolls. You can't deliberately ditch anything you get given while playing the game, you just get it back again and the game continues."

"How did it finish, then?"

"I got fed up, you find that after a few goes. I just kept running past any suspicious old geezer hoping it was Joe. Odd, the one I thought may not be Joe actually was. He was the human statue on the High Street, been there years frightening the Japanese. Weird."

"What about you, Juliette? Was yours any good?"

"It's cold in here, let's go," replied Juliette, quietly, while Vincent just smiled. Mike suddenly cottoned on.

"Did you actually play this at all?" he asked, but still with a smile.

"Brrrrr. Come on! Let's get back in the warm," replied the red-faced Juliette.

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Another Cosy Chat

" . . . **YES, YES**, please, dear, if you would be so kind, coffee all round, that would be lovely, thank you. Chop! Chop. Ah, here they both are! Come in and sit down, that's it."

Daphne Llefevre, yet again feeling insulted at being thought of as the school charlady, humphed off to fetch the coffee. As she went to leave Professor Winch's office, she walked past Josh Beecham and Ezekiel Creek who had just come in.

Ezekiel and Josh had been summoned to Professor Winch's office for yet another cosy chat, as Professor Winch calls them. This time it was to clear up any lingering doubts and confusion concerning their recent escapade in Aberystwyth.

It was Friday evening. Both men were now fully recovered and suitably refreshed, as well as being very relieved to finally be able to stop living in each other's pockets. However, both were of one accord with regard to Hector Jibb: he had made the journey home a very trying affair with his continued protestations. Jibb had made it even more trying by demanding to be driven straight to his home, which wasn't in Aberystwyth but a small village just outside Cardigan. As for Harry, he of course had been no bother at all, and upon his return had been asked to go and see Professor Winch and was promptly given a month's fully paid holiday from his job to help him recover from his ordeal.

Ezekiel Creek and Josh Beecham seated themselves across the desk from their boss and mentor, Professor Winch, and were eager and ready to discuss recent events.

"Glad to see both of you looking fit and well after your little – er – adventure. . . "

"Just about, Headmaster, just about," said Ezekiel.

"And you, Josh?" enquired Professor Winch.

"Fine, Professor, fine and dandy," replied Josh.

Professor Winch smiled, began his finger twiddling, and commenced his explanation of things which the two men had previously been unaware of.

"Good, good. Firstly, I think apologies are in order: I am very sorry to you both for not letting you in on absolutely everything. However, a combination of uncertainty and the need for extreme caution left me with no alternative but to withhold from you both a few facts, and a great deal more suspicions."

"But surely, Headmaster, you could have said you suspected this – er – Marco Dracov. I was sitting right next to him for a short while, and we even talked about brandy of all things. If I'd have known, I could have nabbed him

there and then."

"And that – my dear Ezekiel – is precisely why I did not tell you he was under suspicion. You have no doubt heard the espionage expression, 'Prawns in the game'? You two were just that, I'm afraid. I had to settle both of your minds on chasing Jibb, or at least his outer self. This greatly reduced the odds of Dracov becoming suspicious, that it was his masquerading as Charles Husband which had alerted the authorities. If either of you had been told that he was our man, then one sideways glance, a furrowed eyebrow, or even a jugulistic, 'You're nicked, mate!', would have jeopardised the real purpose of your mission which was to make him think he was free and clear. This was even though, ironically and courtesy of the double sprunchfetter, he was still our man even when looking like either Hector or Harry. Again I apologise for the deception but it was necessary, and even more importantly, it worked."

"You said prawns, Headmaster. It's pawns."

"Don't be silly, I said pawns."

"With all due respect, Headmaster, you did indeed say prawns and I'm equally certain there is no such word as jugulistic."

"Shut up, Ezekiel."

"As you wish, Headmaster."

In the few moments silence, Professor Winch smiled inanely and still twiddled his fingers, while Ezekiel and Josh both mulled over what they had just been told.

It didn't take long for both to realise that there were still loose ends that Professor Winch had not yet explained properly.

Eventually, Josh spoke up.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I still don't get it, not all of it. Just how did you know what his plans were, and I'm not saying this out of wounded pride or jealousy, but how did you know about the sprunchfetter plant? And what on earth is the double sprunchfetter?"

Professor Winch stopped twiddling his fingers, smiled broadly, and gave his reply.

"This will no doubt come as a big surprise to you both, but many years ago along with the real Professor Charles Husband, I was involved in the first cultivation of sprunchfetter plants in this country. It was memories from this association which ultimately put me onto our impostor.

"After smelling the unique aroma of the plant, I came to realise that the supposed much chastened Charlie Husband was someone totally different. He also showed himself to be ingenious by making sure you, Josh, only smelled the single sprunchfetter, as he wanted you to conveniently end his sojourn as the outer essence of Harry Gripweed. He predicted you would use Fogblocker to not only retrieve the real Harry, but unbeknown to you, let the evil genie out of his own bottle, so to speak, and escape in the fog."

A still quizzical Ezekiel Creek rejoined the conversation.

"This gets more and more confusing as we go along, Headmaster. I haven't

a clue as to all this sprunchfetter business, and I still don't understand where this Charles Husband, much chastened or not, fits into all of this."

"Patience, the two of you, patience, all will become clear soon, I promise. It all really began when I was an underwizard at Lesterjester University, many years ago. I was introduced to the study of rare magic herbs by my senior tutor, Professor Charles Husband. Even though I say so myself, I was an exceptional student and we hit it off straightaway. It was probably a bit unfair to the others, but we had soon gone as far as we could all go as a class, and this led to Charlie and I branching out on our own. Although he was officially still the tutor, really we were now equals, but at the same time both of us were still learners, becoming involved in the study of many new and wondrous forms of magic, especially in potions derived from plants and herbs.

"There were many persistent rumours at the time of a plant called the sprunchfetter, which supposedly had powerful properties which could vastly improve Magic-Fusion spells. We went on a field trip to Romania where the rumours emanated from, and began our search. After many weeks we found what we hoped would be the sprunchfetter plant – it matched the description we had, which was of a shamrock or clover type plant but always with five leaves, with each leaf silver coloured – apart from the edges of the leaves which were gold. That was only half the battle. It may have been the sprunchfetter, but did it live up to its reputation when used in Magic-Fusion spells? We had to find out.

"We both agreed that we would take it in turns to see if it really worked. Within hours we had our answer – it was an outstanding success. Firstly, I became Charlie, so to speak, and then later he became me. Even reversing the process was no problem, we were ecstatic. One thing that has stayed with me all these years from those experiments, is the strange aroma of the sprunchfetter, it's not particularly pungent but it is unique."

"But what of the double sprunchfetter plant, Headmaster? And what's all this much chastened and prodigal business? Did the real Professor Husband do something wrong?" asked a still confused Professor Creek.

Professor Winch gave a wry smile. "If there was such a thing as a Sit-back-and-listen spell I would perform it on the pair of you. Once again, show a little patience, if you please, we will get there – a little like British Rail, I suppose, but we will get there in the end."

Both our impatient listeners did their best, sitting back in their chairs and letting Professor Winch continue.

"Where was I? Oh, yes: both Charlie and I returned to the university and we commenced studies on how to cultivate the sprunchfetter in this country. It wasn't long before we had this perfected, but by then I had begun to notice changes in Charlie. Although I didn't really realise what was going on before it was too late, Charlie had become greedy for even more success, and whatever fame and money that came with it. These vices had taken such a hold on him, that nothing or no-one was ever going to get in the way of

him realising his ambitions.

"It was at this point that I inadvertently helped Charlie cross the line, as it were: I went and suggested something which immediately fired his imagination further, not only with greater possibilities regarding Magic-Fusion, but with the increased prestige that hopefully would follow. I put it to him that if we could cultivate a bigger, stronger sprunchfetter, we could make it possible to allow the host to carry the outer appearance of not one – but two other people.

"From that moment on, Charlie acted like a man possessed, not surprising really, seeing as it was Magic-Fusion. . . (Professor Winch chuckled at his own pun, forcing a polite smile from his audience of two). From then on, he wouldn't let up, hounding me to work with him constantly and frequently going without food or sleep until we made a breakthrough. This finally came some months later.

"I realised that we would have to cross the sprunchfetter with a bigger relative within its species, and that meant a return trip to Romania. We went, searched, and came back – jubilant yet again. We had with us the schmurple bush, twice the size of a sprunchfetter but definitely of its family – but on this occasion we found we were running before we had walked – we couldn't cross the two plants. Attempts at creating the double sprunchfetter stalled badly, with whatever new hybrids that did take root, dying in weeks. As ever, with either Magic-Science or ordinary science the real breakthrough was an accident.

"We kept and stored the seeds of both plants in separate jars, but one day, Mogsy, my cat, suddenly jumped off my lap as he had seen a mouse. He leapt on to the shelf and knocked over the contents of both jars, straight into a cauldron. This happened to be full of boiling water, nothing more, nothing less as it was being cleaned. I was soon to find that due to this happy accident, the seeds had somehow fused, swelled and turned the whole lot a bright green. Charlie had a quick look and was about to throw the whole lot out, when I had an idea: although the plant and the bush could not be crossed, maybe their seeds could be.

"We impatiently waited for the cauldron to cool down and checked the contents yet again. Although the cauldron was full of a green, jelly-like substance, there were also hundreds of new seeds, bigger than either of the originals, lodged in the jelly. It was like a combination of melon and orange seeds, so Charlie, jokingly at first, called them moranj seeds, but that's how they first came to be known, and, a little known fact, it is also why the moranj bush and the double sprunchfetter are one and the same thing – still with me? Good! (The two had actually stifled yawns but hoped that Professor Winch hadn't noticed). We then planted the seeds to see what the resulting hybrid would be like. Within weeks we had the first cultivation of the double sprunchfetter plant, and most importantly the plants didn't die but thrived. It was time to carry out the final experiments. We were merrily preparing everything, but something was niggling away at me. Finally, I realised what

the problem was – we would need a third person to take part in the Magic-Fusion spells, as the whole idea was to let one host take on two guests, so to speak.

The only other person I knew who was prepared to take such risks in the name of magic, was a good friend of mine, Barney Mudthrupple. I asked him if he would help, pointed out the risks, and he duly agreed. The sad thing is, the day of the experiment was the last time Barney and I ever spoke to each other, and here's why. . . "

Professor Winch opened the right hand drawer of his desk and pulled out an old, greying cardboard folder. He passed it over to Creek.

"Open it up, take a look."

With Josh leaning over to also look at whatever was in the folder, Ezekiel opened it up fully. There – seemingly – was a photograph of Professor Winch, but with a face like thunder.

They were both confused as to why they were being shown an old snapshot of an angry professor, when something happened which startled both men: when the image in the photograph realised he was being stared at, it burst into animated fury.

With a contorted face and shaking his fists, the image began to rant and rave:

"WHERE IS HE? WHERE'S THAT IMBECILE OF AN EXCUSE FOR A WIZARD?! HE'S NOTHING BUT A JUMPED UP STAGE MAGICIAN! SHOW YOURSELF, WINCHY! YOU JUST COME BACK HERE! I'LL SHOW YOU DOUBLE SPRUNCHFETTER! CAN YOU HEAR ME, WINCH?! AND AS FOR THAT CLOWN, HUBBERS, WAIT TILL I GET MY HA. . . !"

Unfortunately, neither Creek nor Josh could suppress a smile upon witnessing this photographic verbal rampage. In fact both roared with laughter while a red-faced Professor Winch looked on. He wasn't offended, but the sporting professor did want his photograph back.

"If you would please, Ezekiel. Thank you."

He held his hand out to gesture the return of the cause of such amusement. Ezekiel closed the folder, passed it back to Professor Winch, and the cacophony of noise from the highly aggrieved snapshot faded away as the folder was replaced in the drawer.

Ezekiel and Josh finally stifled their laughter after seeing the raised eyebrows of Professor Winch. A still smiling Ezekiel addressed a still blushing Professor Winch.

"I think I can guess what has happened here, Headmaster. I reckon it was a resounding success but too much so – your Magic-Fusion potion was too strong. That picture is not you, but he certainly looks like you. That's your friend, Barney Mudthrupple. Am I right?"

"Yes, you are quite right, Ezekiel, that poor fellow is indeed Barney Mudthrupple. We came to realise that if the compound is too strong, then

there is a risk that some or all of the effects may be irreversible, the features generated may be permanent. Although I would have gladly changed places with Barney, it was only through sheer luck that I remained unaffected. The potion double-generated – a side-effect of this type of magic I had never even heard of before never mind experienced. After taking desperate measures, Charles was thankfully fully restored first, then me, but Barney's fate was to be forever stuck with a Surfeit-of-Winch, if you'll permit me a little humour where there really is none. It could have happened to any of us, of course, but it was Barney who was to suffer, and I may never be able to put it right. We tried of course, but, try as we may, we couldn't get him turned back into himself, so to speak, he's been like that for many, many years, and he has never forgiven me. One good thing that came out of our desperate attempts to put things right, was that at least Barney was not stuck with the essence of two others, only one, me, unfortunately. The thing is, despite this unfortunate mishap, it proved it worked. We just had to refine everything, reduce things really: use only the smallest schmurple bushes, pick only the smallest moranj seeds, and water down the final potion. Our remaining experiments were performed on rats. We figured that they wouldn't be over fussy if we made them look like Napoleon never mind each other. Barney Mudthrupple excepted, we really had cracked it this time."

"I'm sure that covers how Dracov did it, but you still haven't got to how you got involved, Headmaster, how you actually came to suspect that something was wrong – this is what's really mystifying me," said Ezekiel.

"I have to agree with Creek there, Professor. Dracov may have used Magic-Fusion, but how did you know for sure?" added Josh.

A surprisingly stern Professor Winch came to the fore, although his manner was just a pretence.

"I get the distinct impression I am boring you. Shall I continue, or shall we leave it?"

"Er – carry on – of course, carry on, Headmaster," implored Ezekiel.

The knowing Josh Beecham just smiled at his friend's strange sense of humour. Again, Professor Winch returned to the saga of the origins of the double sprunchfetter plant.

"If you are both listening? We have reached the point where things began to go very badly wrong. Our success went to Charlie's head, and mine, I suppose, but at least my excuse was to bask in the glory of the achievement itself and not personally profit from it. This, however, was nowhere near enough for Charles.

"I turned up one morning ready for further studies, but there was no sign of him. He had packed up everything – the plants, the seeds, the potions, our notes – the lot – all gone. It turned out he had also stolen thousands of jupiters from university funds. Neither the Magic Council nor the WFW had any immediate idea where he had gone to, but I had – Romania. It made sense for anyone hoping to gain something from what we had been doing, to go back to the source of both plants. Although we couldn't get him back, he

was eventually spotted in Romania. It turned out that he had used the stolen money to set up a herb farm, and set about growing whole fields of sprunchfetter plants and schmurple bushes. He also developed a highly efficient method of obtaining the millions of seeds from these plants. From the moment he sold his first double sprunchfetter, he began to make millions, but this was also the point he began to get deeper and deeper in trouble.

"As well as the crime of theft of both the money and the samples, which were classed as university property, he soon began to break every importing and exporting law in existence, both in the magic and non-magic worlds. This wasn't just here and Romania, either. It was all over Europe, and then worldwide. On top of this, he did not pay any taxes, not a penny, anywhere. It's a wonder he stayed out of jail, but I suspect he was keeping some Romanian official sweet with bagfuls of money. However, for all the wealth he had, he was a wanted man. Various attempts were made over the years to bring him to justice, but they all failed. He probably sprunchfetted his way out of being caught."

"Sprunchfetted?! That isn't a word either!" interrupted Ezekiel.

"It is now," replied Professor Winch, "and by the way. . . "

"Yes, Headmaster?"

" . . . Shut up."

"Yes, Headmaster."

" . . . So, our villain was up to his neck in it, although it was by then a very rich neck. Years went by and nothing happened until relatively recently – one Marco Dracov appeared on the scene. He was ostensibly a Romanian farmer who had travelled to see the world, but wanted to settle back down in his old country. He moved into an old dilapidated farmhouse and lived the life of a perfectly ordinary crofter.

"However, in reality he was working for our old friend Professor Zenith, who had become increasingly worried about possible infiltration, whether from us, the warlocks, or any one or more of a whole host of forces worldwide. However, with Zenith fearing the warlocks most of all, at least at that time, he knew he needed to place the right man in the right place. It was Zenith who had set Dracov up as a crofter, but his real job was to be Zenith's eyes and ears in that region, an intelligence gatherer, watching and listening for anything which would be of benefit to the League of Mordred. On such occasions he was to report his findings to his evil paymaster.

"Purely by chance, he settled in the same village where Charlie had set up his crooked business. Through being neighbours and chatting in the local tavern, they got to know each other quite well. Sadly for Charlie, he never knew who Dracov was really working for, if he had, then a combination of rightful dread and a penchant for saving his own skin might have seen him manage to escape, but it was not to be."

Professor Winch gave a sigh and then deliberately gestured with his eye to Josh.

"This brings me to one of the most relevant points in this sorry tale. I'm sure you know by now, Josh, that unfortunately you were recognised towards the end of your recent stinit in Romania."

Although this was certainly no longer a surprise to either of the men, Ezekiel Creek could not pass up this golden opportunity. He humphed and immediately derided Josh Beecham for allowing himself to be caught out, although both were still not in possession of all the relevant facts.

"Ha! I'm not in the least surprised! Cover and concealment?! Blend into the surroundings?! Last time I checked, Beecham, a Romanian villager or crofter, or whatever – did not look like a cross between a road worker and a school counsellor with 'Gimme a Hug!' emblazoned on his sweater! You may as well have sent a postcard to say you were coming!"

Before an enraged Josh Beecham could utter one word in his own defence, Professor Winch made a timely intervention.

"No no no, Ezekiel! You have got it totally wrong! Dracov was not the person who recognised him, Charlie did. It would appear that Charles Husband knew all about Josh and had done for a long time. I'm not quite sure how this was – maybe it was a photograph, or maybe he had got to know who Josh was at university, or even Hemlock Hall – but he knew him, and that's all that matters. You of all people, Ezekiel, should know that the spying game is not perfect. Disguises are frequently useless when coming into contact with people who actually know you well."

"Yes, Headmaster, sorry, I jumped the gun there. Sorry, Beecham, my mistake."

This time it was Josh Beecham's turn to humph, and again Professor Winch returned to the story.

"When Charlie was sure it was you, Josh, mooching and bimbling around the place, he panicked. He thought you were there solely to arrest him and bring him back home for questioning. It was this fear of being dragged back here in disgrace which made him appeal to his close neighbour for help. He unwisely told Dracov of his enterprises, and apparently he wanted him to distract you, Josh, in whatever way he could, while Charlie went into hiding until the perceived danger had passed. As ever in these situations, a villain helping a villain doesn't do anything out of friendship, he wanted paying.

"Over the months, while living the life of an impoverished crofter, he befriended you, Josh, while making out to Charlie that he was distracting you. The truth was, he was really stringing both of you along. My guess is that, courtesy of Charlie, he found out you were an agent of ours, and his supposed friendship was an attempt to get information from you which would be useful later on. However, at the same time, he was demanding money, a great deal of money from Charles for continuing to keep you at bay.

"Although Dracov was careful not to pass on the secret of the double sprunchfetter, which Charles had sold only to rich, shadowy underworld figures, he had to offer you something to keep you sweet, and more importantly, unsuspecting. That's how you came to hear of the ordinary

sprunchfetter.

"So, the extortion continued: Dracov was demanding and getting millions of jupiters, pounds, dollars, euros and leus from Charlie. Each time he hiked up his demands, he would also conveniently renew his threats that he would hand him over to you if he didn't pay. The bad thing for Charlie was that this continued even after you had moved on, but he did not tell Charlie this, who was still busy hiding in his barn. Charlie became desperate. His fortune was being stripped away from him, and this was when he sealed his own fate.

"Still not knowing that Dracov was a member of The League of Mordred, he told him all about *'Trevelyan's Book of Applied Chaotagens'*. He told him where it was, what terrible secrets it held, and how he could get it. All in the hope it would make his blackmailer rather than friend, focus his attentions elsewhere, even if it meant risking being caught. That was the last mistake he would ever make.

"Dracov immediately reported all of this to his master, who instructed him to kill Charles, after permanently assuming his identity. Dracov was to return to Britain, more accurately to Wales, where he was to take up Charles' old position as a Senior Tutor at the University of Abracdrystwyth. Within days, the Book of Chaotagens had gone.

"So, to finally bring you up to date, poor Charlie's dead and up until a couple of days ago, Marco Dracov was doing a very good impersonation of him at the university."

"Er – excuse me, Professor, but if Charles Husband was a wanted man, why wasn't Dracov arrested on arrival in Britain? After all, your friend was a known criminal – to both communities," asked Ezekiel.

"We must always credit our enemies with equal or greater intelligence, Ezekiel. Dracov would not have openly arrived on our shores if he did not already have a plan. Part of this plan was to keep a safe distance from the magic community until he was safely ensconced in Britain. Arrivals and departures from these shores, immigration and suchlike, is one area we have to allow our non-magic friends to control, although we do have people in place to monitor things.

"Although I have no doubt that he had banked on it happening as part of a calculated risk, it appears he was indeed arrested on arrival, but he struck a deal. He offered the names of the ringleader and all of his accomplices involved in a huge smuggling racket. He even told them details of the next shipment of drugs, alcohol and jewellery. The authorities were highly delighted of course, and met his price of freedom, and a full pardon. The Magic Council were far from happy, but with major decisions like these it is wiser, although very frustrating, to simply accept the situation. Moreover, the Council, due to maintaining legal parity with the ordinary world as well as not knowing of the deception, felt they had no choice but to reinstate him in his or rather Charlie's old job at the university."

At this point, Daphne finally arrived back with a tray of coffee and some digestive biscuits. With such unexpected duties foisted upon her, Daphne

was well behind her marking of course work and her preparations for the next week's lessons. Her weekend was ruined, and in her anger she slammed the tray down. Unfortunately the over-full coffee pot wobbled and hot coffee dripped down onto Ezekiel Creek's lap. He shot up out of his chair and did something resembling an Irish jig.

"You stupid woman! You did that deliberately!"

Although she certainly had not done it on purpose, neither was she sorry. She simply humphed and went to walk out. Ezekiel Creek, still in considerable discomfort, picked up a biscuit, dunked it in his coffee, and flung it after Daphne. She managed to shut the door just as the soggy biscuit hit it with a schlop type noise. It lodged there for a second and then began to fall to the floor bit by bit.

Josh, despite giving the most solemn of promises not to let personal differences get in the way of things, nevertheless sniggered at the sight of his arch-enemy in some discomfort and resorting to throwing dunked biscuits at Daphne Llefevre. Professor Winch was equally amused but he was not going to let it show.

"Really, Ezekiel, I don't know what's got hold of you, but I would be very grateful if you would please restrict your biscuit throwing to your own office in future. Do you understand?!"

"Yes, Headmaster. Very sorry."

"And Ezekiel?"

"Er – yes, Headmaster?"

"Clean it up after we've finished."

"Yes, Headmaster, certainly."

Josh was anxious to return to the matter in hand.

"Professor, if Dracov managed to steal the Book of Chaotagens, why was he still hanging around? Why didn't he scarper?"

"Yes, good question. Those very thoughts occurred to me, but I do now have the answer.

"Dracov was not expecting to be caught so early into his little masquerade. He thought if he could steal something like the Book of Chaotagens and not come under suspicion, he could stay undetected and wait for any other goodies which would greatly please his master. It was fortunate for us all that he did stay, and that the Addendum to the book came into the picture. I decided that it must be used as bait.

"I'm very glad to tell you we have reached the part you have been most longing to hear, and that is when and how, I came to suspect something was dreadfully wrong.

"After the book was stolen, as you know, Zeke — you, Daphne and I rushed to the university. We checked the vault, the book indeed had been stolen, and with no clues immediately on hand to help us there was nothing further we could do at that time. I had been informed shortly before our trip that Charlie had been reinstated, and so for old time's sake, I suppose, I decided to call in on him. After all, if he was truly sorry for his crimes and

wanted to atone, who was I to refuse to shake his hand and wish him well?"

"I knocked and walked into his office. He looked at me in a puzzling way, but I saw he wore big thick glasses, and so maybe his sight was failing. I introduced myself, he gave me a great big smile and offered his hand and told me he was so glad to see me again. It is obvious now but not at the time that he had been primed by someone, maybe Charlie before he was killed, as to who I was, but then something odd happened. My own memory is not always what it was and I inadvertently began to reminisce with him over things that did not actually involve him. That didn't seem to trouble our friend, who even began to correct me on several minor points on things which neither he, nor I, were ever involved in. I was about to dismiss this as Charlie having trouble with his own memory, but then came the clincher. I smelled something I had not smelled in a long time – the unique aroma of the sprunchfetter, the double sprunchfetter to be precise. I'd rumbled him. The man before me was not Professor Charles Husband.

"I had to think quickly. I decided not to challenge him there and then, but a plan was forming in my mind. I made my apologies, saying something had come up which needed attending to, that's when I collected you, Ezekiel – and Daphne from the pub, and we all came back to Hemlock Hall straightaway. My plan was then put into action, which, a short while later, was ironically aided by the sudden disappearances of Harry and Hector, and you two were despatched to Aberystwyth."

"So, you knew what was going on even when we were over there together? My, my, Headmaster, you did keep that one close to your chest, didn't you?" said an exasperated Ezekiel Creek, who had actually wondered why their departure had been so sudden.

But Josh was again unsure.

"But surely, Professor, if you and Professor Husband had studied both sprunchfetters and its use in Magic-Fusion, surely Dracov would have known he ran the risk of you being able to detect he was an impostor?"

"Yes, you would think so, wouldn't you?" replied Professor Winch. "I think the answer to this is strongly linked to why you, Josh, only came across it in Romania, and even then, not even the double sprunchfetter – and why you, Ezekiel, had never heard of either. After Charlie left our shores all those years ago, any sales of sprunchfetter or even further studies of it in this country were banned, for most. This had the combined effect of preventing a known criminal profiting from his crimes in his own country, but it also limited the knowledge of the sprunchfetter to a handful of people. These were myself, Charlie, Barney, and much more recently, you, Josh, and of course, Dracov. However, Dracov was counting on the knowledge he had ironically passed on to you, Josh, of the single sprunchfetter. Don't feel ashamed about this. It's a classic ploy which sees an opponent getting beaten with his own stick. As for the risk to Dracov through my being the one person in this country who could detect such a fraud, this is indeed a puzzle. I can't decide whether Charlie managed one final noble act in his

miserable life by not telling Dracov he ran the risk of discovery by me, or whether it was some sort of insurance for himself. If that was it, it didn't work out, did it?" Professor Winch's voice was soft and a little broken, but his two visitors did not notice, yet.

"Come now, the Professor Winch I know is never uncertain. What do you really think, Headmaster?" asked Ezekiel.

Tears formed in Professor Winch's eyes, and this time both Ezekiel and Josh did notice.

"I said a little prayer of thanks to Charlie last night, does that answer your question?" He put his head in his hands and sobbed his heart out.

Ezekiel Creek apologised for unintentionally upsetting his old friend, while Josh Beecham shot round the other side of the table and put his arms around Professor Winch's shoulders.

"I understand, Professor, he was still your friend no matter what, I understand. Would you like us to leave?"

Professor Winch wiped his eyes on his sleeve and mustered a reply. "No no, you need to hear a little more. I'll be OK, thank you."

They all sat in silence while Professor Winch gathered his thoughts enough to continue.

After a few minutes he looked rather awkwardly at Ezekiel and Josh, gave a big sigh, and gamely carried on.

"What I haven't told you yet is how we captured Dracov. The first problem was proof, incontrovertible proof that he was our man. That is why I wanted him to steal the Addendum, not the real one, but a copy I had made with a rather different magic enchantment than the original, but first, the arrest.

"I knew I had to use one of our sleepers to get involved. I put the word out for all of our agents, but especially the double agents to keep their eyes peeled, and to listen out for any sudden activation of The League of Mordred, especially around the ports and coastal areas. Although it was guesswork on my part, it often is, you know, I posted our best double agent to keep an eye on the port of Haverford West, further down the coast from Aberystwyth. If something suddenly flared up, he was to make sure he got involved and go undercover in his alternate identity as one of the League, making sure he was in on whatever was going to happen. I'm glad to say it was a spectacular success. Lieber' – er – our man on the inside, got wind of something big. He convinced one of Zenith's mob, mooching about the docks, that he was being relieved of his duties in Wales, and that he was to report to Aberdeen without delay.

"However, our man first of all cleverly elicited from the outgoing dunce, that Dracov was to hand over a highly important document, no doubt the Addendum. This in turn was to be passed on to the captain of a vessel called the Mabel Hagwitch, which would then sail forthwith to Romania, the Port of Constanta on the Black Sea, to be precise."

Ezekiel Creek's eyebrows were now raised. He thought Professor Winch had been about to mention a name he certainly did not want to hear. He had to

ask.

"Pardon me, Headmaster, but I thought you were about to say the name of Lieberman. I hope I'm wrong. Am I?"

"You would have found out sooner or later . . . I am afraid it is none other than Anton Lieberman, one of our sleepers, a double agent."

"A triple agent, you mean, ripping off both sides and keeping the glory and the profits for himself. Headmaster, you of all people should know how untrustworthy he is!" exclaimed Ezekiel Creek.

Josh Beecham reluctantly felt he had to side with Ezekiel Creek on this issue, as he, too, had very grave reservations about using such an unscrupulous liar, thief, and suspected murderer as Anton Lieberman.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I have to agree. Surely you could have asked someone else, considering the possible consequences of Lieberman's involvement?"

Professor Winch gave both men a knowing smile.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! Do not put me down for retirement with heaps of cocoa and Sing along with Lex albums just yet! I said I gave the job to Lieberman, I never said I trusted him. What do you take me for?"

But Ezekiel Creek still wasn't convinced.

"But there is the very real risk that to gain smarty points with The League of Mordred, he may tell them that what he confiscated from Dracov is a fake. You know Zenith pays his henchman well for vital information, and Lieberman has never been to known to pass up the chance of making a few bob for himself."

"The thing is, Ezekiel, I never told Lieberman it was a fake. I wanted him to think that it was the real thing. I gambled on Lieberman's greed and it paid off. He duly passed the stolen but fake Addendum to the captain of the ship, but not before producing his own fake version of the Addendum to pass to me. It's very good, but it was never going to fool me for the simple reason the real Addendum has been here since I first realised it was at risk of being stolen.

"Although the attempt by Vlad the Impala to transmute the Addendum did indeed go wrong, I'm glad to say that our old friend, Forgetful Jones, played his part very well. He surprisingly retrieved the Addendum within the time limit and replaced it with the dud. But where he did slip up was making that casual remark about you and Josh, and your mission. He saw your suspicious looks and couldn't apologise enough to me later on. Still, he's not called Forgetful without due reason, and it probably kept both of you on your toes, eh? But as for Lieberman, several far more reliable agents of ours kept an eye on him, saw that the fake Addendum was safely sailing away, and arrested Dracov, who was then taken off to the tower. . . "

"Of London. . . ?" asked Ezekiel.

"Blackpool," replied Professor Winch.

"Oh," said Ezekiel.

"So," continued Professor Winch, "after interrogation, our man finally

cracked and spilled the beans – I expected as much, The League of Mordred have never been known to be brave and resilient when caught. I think it's the threat of what their own side would do to them if they managed to return to base and have to admit to failure. It's far better for them to be alive in our prisons than festering in theirs, or even killed stone dead. It is through this frank confession that I have been able to pass on much of what you yourselves, did not know. Up until Dracov's capture, I was unsure of many things myself."

"And what of Lieberman now, Headmaster?" asked Ezekiel.

"A little white lie had to be the order of the day there. Mr Lieberman is currently laying low in a little town called Thornton, just outside Liverpool. He is waiting for an invasion by the Warlocks of Bucharest. I told him that's where we expect our main battles to be, and that The League of Mordred have taken over running the Steed and Vine Public House and are awaiting the warlocks' arrival. I think we can keep much needed distance between ourselves and Lieberman, while we fight the real battles."

"What will happen to Dracov, Professor? Will it be prison?" asked Ezekiel, while Josh was now miles away, and had been since hearing the current location of Anton Lieberman.

"At first, we were going to just keep him locked up in the tower, but I then came up with something far more useful, but Lieberman first: this sly rogue's skulduggery has actually helped, especially as he is currently in a state of trustworthiness as far as Zenith is concerned. We packed him off to Liverpool even before arresting Dracov, so neither Lieberman nor indeed Zenith or any of The League of Mordred, are aware that their man has been rumbled.

"Now as for Dracov: we have decided to keep him in position at the university, but from now on he will be working for us. We have told him that if we get one whiff of any funny business, we'll unceremoniously pack him off to Romania to who would no doubt be a very displeased master."

"That's all very well, Headmaster, but Lieberman may smell a rat at some point, especially if the allies of his evil paymasters do not show. What if he gets a message through that it's all a set up?"

"Don't worry, I thought of that one, Zeke. The League has a very strict chain of command. I'm sure you will be glad to hear that his immediate superior is another one of our double agents, a lady this time. She lives in Thornton, actually. She is very charming but ruthless if need be. The twist here is that Lieberman does not know that she's one of us, which is just as well. If the warlocks do get through, then she will seem bona fide, but if they do not, she will be ready with plausible tales of delay and setbacks, and so on."

"And just who would this charmer be, Headmaster?" asked Ezekiel.

"Her name is Estella Grant."

Ezekiel nodded in vague remembrance at the name, but Josh adopted a sudden look of surprise.

"Estella Grant? From Thornton?"

"The very same. Any problem with that, Josh?"

"Er – no, sir, none."

"Good. Unless you have any further questions, then I'd like to move on to something else. Zeke? Josh?"

"No, Headmaster, I can't think of anything else, and may I say what a marvellous job you have done – well done."

"Must agree there, boss, astounding. You had me and Creek fooled a few times, but I can see now it was all necessary, brilliant, well done. Although I must admit I am surprised to hear Estella's name after so many years."

"I thought that might surprise you, but don't just thank me, well, maybe a little, but it was really a team effort, we all played our part, even Harry and young Jibb, albeit unwittingly."

Professor Winch noticeably began to fidget in his chair and looked more than a little apprehensive. He needed to ask something of Ezekiel Creek.

"Er – well now, Ezekiel, a favour please, if you would. . . ?"

"If it's in my power, Headmaster, fire away," replied a curious Ezekiel Creek.

"Um — well now, it's this Blackpool thing tomorrow night. We're all going to be travelling together, and I was wondering if you would consider using your—"

But before Professor Winch could get to the word 'car', Ezekiel Creek's face had already dropped, and he began his protest.

"What?! Ten people in Zeddy?! To Blackpool?! No, I'm sorry, Headmaster but the answer has to be no."

Professor Winch picked up his wand and waved it around feigning the performing of a spell.

"Not even if we. . . " and waved the wand again.

"No no no. I'm sorry, but the answer is still no! It can't fit ten in and I'm not having it magicked to death! It's made several long journeys this week and I think this has damaged the engine. I'm sorry, Headmaster, you'll have to find another way," said the poker-faced resolute Ezekiel Creek.

Professor Winch gave a sigh. "Oh, well." He again opened the right hand drawer to his desk and pulled out the folder containing the photograph of his one-time friend, Barney Mudthrupple.

He opened up the folder, looked down, and gave the most sheepish smile a man can give, and waited. He didn't have to wait long. . .

"SO! THERE YOU ARE AT LAST! YOU DUNDERHEAD! YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A MADMAN! LEAVE ME HERE LOOKING LIKE THIS, WOULD YOU?! IT COULDN'T BE CLARKE GABLE OR DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, COULD IT?! OH NO, IT HAD TO BE YOU! IT HAD TO BE CRUSTY-FACED, UGLY OLD PROFESSOR WINCH. I'LL GET EVEN ONE OF THESE DAYS. JUST YOU WAIT! I'LL SPRUNCHFETTER MY ARSE ONTO YOUR FACE! HOW WOULD YOU LIKE THAT, WINCHY, YOU— "

Professor Winch gave another sigh, and ignoring the tirade, spoke to his

photographic doppelganger.

"Hello, Barney, you can shout and yell at me all you want but you may as well save your breath. I'm sorry about this but we are going to have to make use of your television tomorrow evening, there is no other way. I'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye for now, old friend."

"OLD FRIEND?! I'M NO FRIEND OF YOURS AT ALL! SO! YOU COME CRAWLING BACK WHEN IT SUITS YOU, EH?! JUST YOU WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW! AND TELL THAT OTHER AMATEUR WIZARD, HUBBERS, I'LL SORT HIM OUT AS WELL! DO YOU HEAR ME, WINCH —"

But Professor Winch had heard enough, and he certainly wasn't going to use such an emotive scene to pass on the bad news of the less than dignified death of Charlie 'Hubbers' Husband. He snapped shut the folder containing the photograph of the only person Professor Winch knew who not only lived just outside Blackpool but whose television was on the national Telly-Porting network. He put the folder back in the drawer and looked up at Josh and Ezekiel, who were careful not to laugh at his dreadful predicament. Professor Winch forlornly waved his wand yet again in Ezekiel Creek's direction.

"No, Headmaster. I do sympathise, I really do, but no," said Ezekiel. He would do anything, risk anything, even his life for his friend and boss, apart from one thing, and that was his beloved Zeddy.

Professor Winch placed his wand down on the table, put his hands together and gave one of his classic inane smiles. His two visitors recognised the sign telling them that the meeting was over.

"Thank you, Headmaster, that was very informative. Tomorrow night, then? Goodnight," said Ezekiel.

"Goodnight, Professor, see you tomorrow," added Josh.

"Goodnight, to both of you. Oh, and Ezekiel?"

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"Clean up the mess you made earlier," said Professor Winch, gesturing with his wand once again and making a brum-brum noise under his breath.

"Yes, of course, Headmaster," replied a sulking Ezekiel Creek.

39

Things are Happening

IT WAS EARLY SATURDAY EVENING.

At Hemlock Hall Professor Creek was asked by Professor Winch to ensure that Abigail, Madeline, Leo and Dutch were all ready in time for their trip to Blackpool, and just as importantly to be suitably attired. For even an early autumn night in Blackpool most of which would be spent outside, this meant thick woollies, hats, and even Wellington boots.

At Krickenstaltz, Professor Ren Stannich delegated this self-same task to his unwilling younger brother, Ernst, who in return, rather unwisely suggested that Marina would be more appropriate for such a task.

After an ear bashing of a lifetime from Marina ('Ziss iz ze zerd millennium! You – you caveman!'), he wisely went to hurry along Juliette, Vincent, and Mike.

However, other much more sinister things were happening in other places which would have serious consequences for the respective communities of Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz.

*

Freddie Bones, the new chief of the Cannibal-Elves of Schnarkenfeld, sat with his men at the big, long, rough wooden table in their ice-house, finishing off their dinner. This consisted of the roasted remains of five Icelandic fishermen whose boat had strayed off course, resulting in their trawler becoming ice-bound in the perilous, icy waters of Schnarkenfeld.

This was a supposedly uninhabited remote area of Iceland, the belief of which suited Freddie and his men, but their existence was suggested in endless folk tales of lost fishermen hastily gobbled up by man-eating elves. Some years before, a succession of fishing boats had failed to return to port; as a result many Icelanders had begun to think that these were not just folk tales after all.

The tale of derring-do Josh had related to both an enthralled Vincent and a disbelieving but highly amused Mike during their night out at the SCR in Amsterdam, had not after-all been just a tall story to pass the time away. Josh had indeed been captured by the cannibal-elves but had escaped after killing their leader, Billy Bones. Josh had then single-handedly overcome a fierce attack from their allies, the wolf-whales, despatching many of their number to an icy grave at the bottom of the waters of Schnarkenfeld.

Freddie burped, picked his teeth, wiped his mouth with his hand and turned to his men to get them to join him in making their nightly vow of vengeance against the man who had killed Freddie's father. He raised his glass of ruby red fisherman wine.

"Death to Beechy Bonce! May my father be avenged!"

The men all raised their glasses.

"Death to Beechy Bonce! May my father be avenged!"

"No no no no no! He wasn't your father, was he?! How many times have we been through this? I'll start again – and get it right this time! Ready?! Death to Beechy Bonce! May my father be avenged!"

"Death to Beechy Bonce! May *YOUR* father be avenged!"

"Thank you. Thank you, my friends, one day I promise you we will all be avenged."

Freddie turned to one of his more intelligent comrades, Legbone Larry, called so because of his particular liking for boiled human thigh meat.

"It is time once again my friend – to hail Zoopnah, leader of the wolf-whales, for any news of the man called Beechy Bonce."

"Yes, my leader!" shouted Legbone Larry in fervent obeyance.

"Oh, and Larry?"

"Yes, my leader?!"

"Don't shout, I'm only here."

"Yes, my leader! Oops, sorry. I'll go now. . . "

Legbone Larry bowed, left the ice house, and after picking up a huge, woolly mammoth tusk which was stored in antler brackets embedded in the ice house wall, made the short walk to the icy water's edge. He lifted the tusk and blew on it, giving out three huge blasts of sound, a bit like an alpine horn but much louder.

Within a minute or so came the tell-tale deafening roar of the waters of Schnarkenfeld being parted, letting Larry know that Zoopnah had heard the call. His huge, wolf-like head rose forty feet out of the water, causing a giant wave to crash down onto the shore line.

Zoopnah opened his mouth and let out a roar. This was a terrifying, blood-curdling cacophony. It was actually just the wolf-whale way of saying hello, but anyone who did not know that would more likely be saying goodbye to their kith and kin. Legbone Larry cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted – "Greetings, Zoopnah, leader of our friends and allies, have you any news of the scum called Beechy Bonce?!" Larry was so used to the answer being no that he was already waving Zoopnah away and turning go back in, but tonight there was a different answer.

"Good news, my friends. I have been speaking to one of The League of Mordred, the one called Jackson. He has found out that Beechy Bonce will be in Blackpool, England, this evening. He will ensure that he and the rest of his kind will be at the water's edge at ten o'clock. Go! Tell your glorious leader, Freddie Bones, that tonight vengeance will be ours: vengeance for his father – and vengeance for my dead brothers lying on the bottom of the waters of Schnarkenfeld! Tell all to prepare right now. My army is waiting to take you speedily to Blackpool. Hurry!"

Legbone Larry bowed, turned, and ran back into the ice-house. Zoopnah once more caused a mini tsunami as he dived below to give orders to his

bloodthirsty army. Once back inside, Larry passed on the welcome tidings to the gathering of cannibal-elves. Freddie was ecstatic and once more ordered a rousing toast of vengeance.

"Death to Beechy Bonce! May my father be avenged! No no no! Arrgh, I give up! Let's go!"

*

Around the same time, other fearful developments were taking place elsewhere. This was in a perfectly ordinary front lounge in a perfectly ordinary terraced house, in a town called Morecambe. This was further up the Fylde Coast from Blackpool. Here there was a gathering of strange men, very strange men indeed. One man was standing in front of the fireplace addressing rather a large group of other men, far too many for the room to comfortably hold. The odd thing was, they were all dressed in thick, heavy clothing, with big hats and scarves covering the whole of their faces, even their ears.

Johann Hentz, the man at the fireplace, left just enough room to be able to speak through his scarf, or so he thought. "FAFF FU FAFFZON FU AF FUF FEFF, Oh, soffy, lef me loofeff thif a bit more . . . ah, that's it. Thank you, Jackson, you have done well. That's it, then, gentlemen, victory is at hand – we can't fail. We will lie in wait on both flanks of the unsuspecting WFW and Magic Council garbage. After Zoopnah's and Freddie Bones' combined armies make a frontal assault from the sea, we will close in and victory will be ours. We will wipe out their leadership, their best agents – and anyone who just happens to be there will soon wish they were not!

"In the panic, reinforcements will surely be taken from London to Blackpool. Such rash redeployment will clear the way for the Warlocks of Bucharest to move rapidly from Thornton to London while our Southern Province will rise up and take the whole of the south. Their unsuspecting Gaelic comrades will then be routed with consummate ease. Gentlemen, the British Isles will soon be ours!"

The man called Jackson stood tall and raised his cup of cocoa. "Death to the Beechy Bonce! May my dad take revenge!"

He looked around and noticed that everyone was silent and had lowered their scarves slightly to stare at him. Johann Hentz tutted several times out loud.

"Jackson, how many times must we go through this?! That's a cannibal-elf rallying cry, or toast or whatever. Just because they said it while you were there doesn't mean everyone else says it! And besides, you've got it wrong, what has your father got to do with it?"

The leader of the mysterious men in scarves said no more on the matter, and was just grateful that the frequently stupid Jackson had at least managed to pass on the right messages to their allies. He addressed his men once more:

"Gentlemen, it is time! Victory will be ours!"

With that, the occupants of the overcrowded front lounge of thirty-one

Rothermere Avenue, Morecambe, traipsed out in crocodile fashion to catch the X52C bus from Morecambe to Blackpool.

While the economy minded fiendish villains travelled on public transport to begin their quest for world domination, the children were preparing for a night out in Blackpool.

*

Professor Creek brusquely swept into the Camelot common room to collect his four charges.

"Come along! Come along, you four. Follow me to the Main Hall. Mr Thorpe, don't open that pie now, if you please – you can stuff your face all you want once we get there. Come along now!"

They all had to go at quite a pace to keep up. Very soon they were in the Main Hall, venue for all the major occasions and festivities throughout the Hemlock Hall school year.

Already in the hall and stood around a huge widescreen television which they had never noticed before, were Professor Winch, Daphne Llefevre, Professor Cornstone, Ezekiel Creek, Jez Gidebrand the blacksmith, and Josh Beecham.

The latter's reappearance had been as big a surprise for the four children as it had been to Mike when they had met up again at Krickenstaltz.

Mr Gildebrand's presence was also a surprise, at least to the children, although to many of this rather secretive community he was known for frequently tagging along on irregular or clandestine assignments, despite not having any official status whatsoever.

The six adults stood around talking quietly when Professor Winch saw the children and smiled.

"Ah, yes, our brand new office temps! Come on, you four, gather round. That's it! I think Jezmond, if you go first, show everyone how it's done, eh?" A strangely excitable Professor Winch didn't even wait for a reply. Instead, he slyly manoeuvred himself to go second in the queue. Seconds later he was third.

Abigail had seen Professor Winch's queue jumping in reverse and whispered to the others. "There's something wrong here, you know. Did you notice how Professor Winch slyly moved back two places? Look! He's done it again!"

Dutch was grinning. He thought he knew the reason for Professor Winch's strange behaviour.

"He's a scaredy cat! All that bunk he gives us about being brave and facing your fears, and he won't even Telly-Port! Either that or he's amphibious, you know, scared of being in enclosed spaces," mocked Dutch.

"Er – I think you mean claustrophobic, Dutch," retorted Madeline. "This is all odd though, something just doesn't seem right."

Leo, who had been quiet since arriving in the Main Hall, finally spoke, sharing with his pals the focus of his musing.

"If this is a conference we're going to, where's the rest of the staff? And

why are the other two coming along?"

But further opportunity for the four friends to theorise on what was really going on was unceremoniously curtailed.

"YOU FOUR! Keep quiet! Watch Mr Gildebrand so you make sure you don't get it wrong on your turn!" It was Professor Creek, seemingly irked by the children but with a secondary concern in his eyes.

Even old blacksmith Jez, who was totally unaware of the headmaster's doppelgangruous dilemma noticed the tension.

"Jezmond! Come on, old fellow! Time to go!" urged Professor Winch from way back in the queue.

"Oh – er – yes, Headmaster – sorry."

Jezmond walked up to the television set and twiddled the tuner. He eventually found the Travel Channel. He then went to the next dial and started turning that.

The children were mesmerised as hundreds of images of living rooms flashed across the screen. Eventually the twiddling stopped, and in the bottom right hand corner of the screen appeared a name and address – *'Barnaby H Mudthrupple – Bispham'*. The four different cases on the ledges below the TV, which the children had assumed to be a VCR, a DVD player, a Playstation and a Cable TV box, all moved outwards until they formed a small but sturdy set of steps.

Jez climbed up and into the screen, down the corresponding steps on the other side, and was soon safely through and in Barney Mudthrupple's front lounge.

Barney Mudthrupple was standing and waiting in front of his own television, believing he would finally be able to vent his fury on Professor Winch, but the first person he saw was Jez Gildebrand.

"So! He's a coward as well as a raving lunatic! He couldn't be the first one through, eh?! Sent you through first so he can hide behind your fat backside, has he?!"

Although Jez and the old man were out of vision, the row could be heard back in the Main Hall. Professor Winch became more noticeably disturbed and slyly manoeuvred himself to get further back in the queue, but he was still in front of the children. He shouted up to Josh at the front, "Er – you next, Josh, must keep it moving."

Josh stepped up and was gone. No sooner had he climbed out on the other side than more shouting could be heard.

"Your turn, Edwin, if you would, please, then Daphne, then Ezekiel, and then I'll see the children through . . . oh dear, I've forgotten my handkerchief, won't be a moment," said Professor Winch. However, before he could leave the hall, many different hands immediately offered Professor Winch a variety of brand new sparkling white handkerchiefs.

"Thank you, all of you, that is very considerate . . . but oh look, it was in my pocket all of the time," said a very worried looking Professor Winch.

Professor Cornstone and Miss Llefevre took their turn and left for Bispham.

"Come along, Zeke, old chap! We must hurry things along!"

"Nonsense, Gabriel! You haven't done this for a while. It's best if you go now, and I will see the children through."

The blood visibly drained from Professor Winch's face as he slowly stepped up and into the TV. Professor Creek, still with concern in his eyes, watched and waited until Professor Winch had disappeared from view. He then snapped out of his musing and turned to jolly the children along.

"OK, ladies and gents, there has been enough dilly dallying, hop to it! That's it," said Professor Creek, guiding the children through the TV.

Once in Barney's lounge, they witnessed a scene of absolute chaos and mayhem.

On a sofa were Josh Beecham and Edwin Cornstone, nursing black eyes. Jez was in the middle of the lounge, struggling to hold on to an enraged old man, kicking out and shouting at everyone but mostly at Professor Winch. Daphne could only bite her lip and say very quietly, 'Warra palava. Yeeer.'

Immediately upon arriving, Professor Winch had wisely hidden behind the blacksmith's huge frame, just as Barney said he would. Barney's wild protests continued:

"Put me down, you great lumbering oaf! Put me down! And you, Winchy, hiding behind lardy pants here, you just come and face me! You won't get away! He'll have to put me down sometime, and then you're for it! Come and face me now!"

Professor Winch gave a big sigh and walked round to face Barney Mudthrupple.

"I'm sorry, Barney, I had hoped we could sort this out in a civilised manner, but maybe another time, eh? I'm sorry but we have got to go."

"Another time! What do you mean, another time?! What's up with right—" Barney Mudthrupple said no more. Barney Mudthrupple was back at Lesterjester University, laughing and joking with his best pal, Gabriel Winch. This was of course, before anyone had ever heard of the sprunchfetter plant, double or single.

"FDP. Nice choice, Headmaster, although I wish you had done it earlier, but to do that you would have had to go first, I wonder why you didn't?" said an unhappy, surly Edwin, still nursing his black eye.

"Yes, maybe so, Edwin, but I did want to set things straight. I was even going to offer to perform the brand new Serious Long-Term Reversal spell, but we're somewhat behind schedule so that will have to be another time. I think, Jezmond, it's time to put old Barney to bed, he'll be out for hours, but then again, so shall we! Ho! Ho!"

Apart from an affected, 'Ha ha, very funny, Gabe. Yeer!' from Daphne Llefevre, no-one else even managed a minor titter at Professor Winch's jokey pun.

As Jez started to carry the dreamy old fellow upstairs, the children caught sight of the ageing professor. They were amazed to see that the old man was the absolute spitting image of Professor Winch.

They could only stare at such a sight. This was more than just a usual fun double of a famous person that you see in the papers, they only suggest a likeness. This was an absolute and totally identical one-hundred per cent replica of Professor Winch.

"Gosh! I remember now!" suddenly exclaimed Madeline who had been looking from one professor to the other, while at the same time dredging up long forgotten memories in her mind.

"You what, Maddie?" and similar were the immediate responses from her friends.

Madeline had meant to keep what she had suddenly remembered to herself, but had accidentally blurted it out. "Er – well. . ." went to reply Madeline, who then noticed all of the staff, but particularly Professor Winch, giving her some very searching looks indeed. "Sorry, it was nothing, I was mistaken." She shook her head slightly at her friends, the classic sign to silently say 'not now'. The very slight nod from Professor Winch let her know that he concurred. He broke eye contact and continued getting ready to leave and very vocally urging the rest of his party to do the same. But Madeline mused further on the remembered (and eavesdropped) conversation from some years ago.

*

An old family friend by the name of Agnes Pollett had visited the Chalmers family in Southport one night. Madeline was supposedly fast asleep upstairs, but was in reality wide awake and listening to every word.

She had heard the badly shaken old dear ask for a brandy, then another, and then one more for the road and then what appeared to be one for the motorway, all intersecting A and B roads, Route 66 in America and possibly the Trans-Siberian Railway, as the bottle was very soon emptied.

Agnes related the scare she had suffered earlier on in the day. It turned out that she was Barney Mudthrupple's housekeeper, and that she had had the confusing experience of meeting both Barney and Professor Winch on the same day. The elderly Mrs Pollett had left Barney at home in Bispham, right next to Blackpool, nursing a broken leg. She had told him she was going to visit her sister in Liverpool, but in reality had gone off to a job interview at Hemlock Hall, after saying to her family and friends that she was sick to death of the old tyrant.

She got the fright of her life as she thought it was Barney who beckoned her into the office for the interview. She convinced herself that Barney was playing a wicked practical joke on her because she was daring to leave his employ.

The only way for anyone to calm her down was to receive, reluctantly of course, a full explanation from Professor Winch, and a brandy.

*

The Hemlock Hall contingent were almost ready to continue their journey, but Abigail was so astonished by what she had just seen, she wanted to know more.

"Er – excuse me, Professor Winch, I hope you don't mind my asking, but was that your twin brother just now? Or – er – is it some sort of Magic Cloning?" However, she had chosen the wrong time to ask any such questions.

"Later, my dear, later, for now we must get to Blackpool. Everyone ready? Oh, nearly forgot, who has enough funny money for the tram?"

The males of the party just looked at each other gesturing no can do, but the girls and Daphne Llefevre were already checking their purses.

"No need, kiddywinks, put yer dosh away. Teachers may be low paid, but I fink we can afford a parnd a two fer the tram. Jus' goes to show though, men, useless at times, absolutely useless."

"Yeer!" said Dutch.

"'Ere, ya cheeky monkey!" said Daphne, and gave Dutch a clip around the ear.

They all trooped out of Barney's house and onto the promenade, to wait for the next tram into Blackpool.

At Krickenstaltz, Mike Miller and the Stannich children had also commenced getting ready for their night out.

"I am absolutely roasting!" complained a profusely sweating Mike to his new friend, Vincent Stannich.

They were standing in Vincent's room, as Mike had obediently got ready well in time for the off, but Vincent was never much fussed on doing as he was told and was only half dressed for the trip.

Mike, despite an unsuccessful mild protest, was wearing a vest, two woolly jumpers, black corduroy trousers, his new outdoor coat from Josh, and a pair of wellies which were quite tight as they had been forced on over three pairs of heavy woollen socks. To make matters worse the wellies were bright green. A red and blue bobble hat completed the ensemble.

Vincent, with a last minute spurt which saw his vest hanging out was also similarly dressed. This was apart from his wellies which were regulation filthy brown, well, regulation for Vincent. He, too, was equally over-heating.

"Yeah, I know what you mean, mate. Does Marina know it's Blackpool we're going to? We're all togged up for Alaska here!"

"D'ya know," said Mike, "I haven't been kitted out like this since I was seven when me and Donaldo and his friends made a snowman in the park."

"I thought you said you don't get on with Donaldo?"

"I don't. I was the snowman. Nearly froze to death!"

Vincent chuckled heartily at this unfortunate but still comic image of Mike, stuck in a park, spatted with snow on a cold January afternoon. Mike feigned offence at the continuing laughter. "Funny, eh! I'll do it to you sometime, see how you like it! Anyway, hadn't we better be going?"

There was a knock on the door and in walked Juliette. She was wearing denim jeans, a very thick, bright red waterproof jacket down to her knees over a very thick cream-coloured jumper, a big blue fluffy woolly hat, and

unlike the other two, actually wore ordinary training shoes rather than daft looking Wellington boots. Vincent took one look at his sister.

"Oh here she is, Mother Christmas!" mocked her brother.

"So! I'll be a nice and warm Mother Christmas, won't I? Wow, nice wellies, Mike – not!" replied Juliette.

Mike joined in the laughter at his own expense, but he rather wished it was not in relation to his Wellington boots.

There was another knock at the door and in walked Ernst. "Ready you lot? NICE WELLIES, MIKE! BRAVO!"

Although blushing, Mike still managed a laugh, but he did wonder whether he was going to be the stooge for the entire evening. Ernst clapped his hands and then rubbed them as if he was anticipating cold weather.

"Let's go, kids! Can't keep big bruv waiting, you know what he's like."

They all trooped off out of the room and down the corridor. A few moments later they were all outside the sixth oak door, along with Professor Stannich Senior, Marina, Laszlo, Ellen, Gregor and not forgetting Bertie the Jukebox, who, Mike noticed, had very luminous red eyes this evening.

Ernst asked his brother if he could use his newer, far more efficient TMG to get there. This would be instead of using the older professor's more traditional model, and of course, method, but Professor Ren Stannich was having none of it.

"Aagh, glitzy schmitzy! Ve cannot be poopzing our vay into ze Blackenstaltz! No, no, no, ziss iz right vay," he said, pointing to his well-worn crystal model of the Academy.

The Krickenstaltz contingent stood cramped and uncomfortable, but patiently waiting for Professor Stannich to use his TMG. He fumbled around for quite a few seconds before finally fixing it into its place on the oak door. He assumed the air of a man of great importance and with his hands on his heart, stated firmly, "Blackenstaltz!" He opened the door, looked in, muttered something, and quickly shut the door again.

"Zorry, volks, evidently not clear enuf." He coughed to clear his throat. "Blackenstaltz!" Again, he opened and just as quickly closed the door. "Vy duz ziss zing never verk ze vay it iz suppozed to, eh?" said a blushing and slightly annoyed Ren Stannich.

The little assembly all gave muffled sniggers. An opportunist Ernst was about to yet again offer his services but he was beaten to it by Juliette.

"Excuse me, Father, but I might be able to help. I've heard that because of the – er – strange acoustics, that it works better with a female voice. Well – er – shall I try, Father?"

"Humph! Might as vell," replied her disgruntled father.

Juliette quickly swapped TMGs and said in a firm voice, "Blackpool!" She opened the door, and there waiting in the entrance of the Top-Deck Restaurant at the top of Blackpool Tower, was the proprietor Jean Michelle, standing there in his trademark black and whites with the ubiquitous redundant tea towel over his arm. Jean Michelle gave a great big smile

showing off his gleaming white teeth.

Juliette politely stood back to let her father be the first through. He strode forward with his arm extended, ready to shake hands.

"'Ello, Jean Michelle – er – LONG TIME, EH?"

"Er – welcome Re' – er – Professor Stannich. Welcome, all of you, do come in. Sit down, make yourselves comfortable. You are za first ones 'ere, but the others should not be too long."

The Krickenstaltz crew trooped in, glanced round, and saw that the only table set out for them to sit at was, unusually, alongside the wall to the left of the entrance. The rest of the restaurant had been rearranged, as if ready for a conference or a meeting of some sort.

As they began to get settled in, taking their hats and coats off to cool down, Professor Ren Stannich looked impatient.

"Pleeze everyvon, get comfy and order vot you vish, I'm paying. Pleeze excuze me vile I talk ov ze olden times viz Jean Michelle, eh?"

The two walked off to the far side of the room and began to chatter away. Mike thought this to be rather odd and kept his eyes on them. He got the feeling from the traded whispers that all was not well. Jean Michelle in particular looked ill at ease with flashing eyes giving undue weight to the supposedly nostalgic chat. Mike was not sure whether he could just dismiss this as classic Gallic animation, especially as both men seemed to be frowning. He thought if it's the good old days, they must not have been that good after all; plus, the others? Just who were these others who were coming? He knew he was shortly to meet his headmaster, Professor Winch, but what others?

Mike mused on something which he had not been able to dwell on up until then because of all the hubbub of getting ready and then the journey. What exactly was going on? Why were they all in Blackpool at all? Mike, Juliette, and Vincent were all seated on the last three seats of the table along the wall. Mike leaned over to the two and whispered, "Have either of you got any idea as to what is going on? This isn't normal all this, is it?"

Juliette just shrugged her shoulders. Vincent whispered back, "No, it certainly ain't, Mike. Something is definitely up."

Their puzzlement had to be postponed as Professor Ren Stannich rejoined the party, with Jean Michelle in tow to take their orders. The children stuck to the tried and tested and excellent fish and chips. The others ordered a whole range of more exotic dishes.

The meals were soon served and everyone chatted away to each other as they ate. They also enjoyed listening to nostalgic ramblings from Ren Stannich concerning many nights out and holidays in Blackenstaltz. The merriment was disturbed about an hour and a half later when Jean Michelle reappeared and whispered into Ren Stannich's ear. Unfortunately, it wasn't the best of whispers and Mike, as he was the nearest to the two, could make out some of what was said. There was definitely something about the wrong tram, and, 'Went to Fleetwood by mistake' (Fleetwood was another town, a

small port to boot, further along the coast from Blackpool), and there was also something about taxis. Mike also heard something which made his heart beat so loudly he felt as if he was auditioning for an Edgar Allen Poe film.

'The children are with him!' Mike's heart thumped even louder ashe dwelled on what it meant: 'Has Professor Winch brought his friends from Hemlock Hall?!' But the ever rational Mike decided it could mean anything, such as, 'I told him the children are here', and other variations in reference to himself, Juliette and Vincent, not Leo and the others. Mike was suddenly forced out of his pondering.

"Hello there! Earth to Mike Miller! Come in, Mike Miller!" It was Ernst. He had his hands to his mouth pretending he had a megaphone. The reason for this was that his elder brother had tried to get Mike's attention, but Mike was so deep in thought, he had not noticed.

"Er – oh – sorry, Professor, just thinking of this and that."

"Maybe your friends from ze 'Emlock 'All, per'apz?" said a wickedly smiling Professor Stannich. "Anyvay, Mike, pleeze come viz me, zer are zum people who dearly vish to zee you."

With Mike's heart playing lead role in act two of the Best of Edgar Allan Poe, he got up, and shaking life a leaf as he stumbled along, walked off with Professor Stannich. As they walked towards a door Mike had not noticed on his previous visits, the man called Jackson – still heavily attired – came in from the cold.

40

Coasting Along

MIKE NOTICED that the heavily-cloaked stranger walking towards him was grinning rather stupidly. This mystified Mike and gave him goose bumps to add to his already existing state of extreme nervousness. However, the stranger just walked on by, still grinning, but Mike had no time to dwell on such matters. Professor Ren Stannich stopped and put his hands firmly on Mike's shoulders as they reached the door.

"Mike, ziss iz az far az I can go, I 'ave to return to ze meeting immeediately. Pleeze go zru ze door, and take ze – er – 'ow you call it? Ze eskeeliftyvator? Ven you get to ze ground pleeze go in ze door a few feet up on ze left. Your vizituz vill be vaiting for you zer. Bye, Mike, see you later."

"Bye, Professor, thanks," replied Mike, not knowing why or what he was thanking him for.With that, Ren Stannich turned and went back to the restaurant.

Mike stepped in the eskeeliftyvator, better known to most people as a lift or elevator, and pressed the button marked GF.

There was something else. He couldn't possibly solve all of the mystery as to exactly what was going on, but he put two and two together and came up with three and ten-elevenths recurring, which was close enough. His little trip was just a diversion. The real business was back in the restaurant and was no doubt to do with the perils that faced them all.

Mike felt vulnerable, scared, and was more than a little unwilling in his mind to accept being seen as not only part of the problem, but of the solution as well. The fact that he could not share this with any of his friends just made things worse, but he knew he had to carry on somehow.

A slightly perspiring Mike checked to see if the professor was right. Yes, there was the door, the only door so there was no danger of getting the wrong one. He walked a few feet up the passageway. He could see it was still part of the Tower complex, but it was like an extension, perhaps added on some time after the tower itself had been built.

Mike stood outside, his heart was still thumping. He hadn't been told to knock but years of enforced formality saw to it that he did. He knocked, he hesitated for a couple of seconds, gave a deep breath and walked in. He immediately came up against a huge wall of sound. There was shouting, cheering, whooping, and yelling – from Josh Beecham.

"Pipe down, Josh! You'll give the lad a heart attack!" said Professor Winch.

The assorted visitors from Hemlock Hall, apart from one of course, abandoned any semblance of decorum and dignity. They all stampeded towards Mike, who soon found himself being squeezed, hugged, squashed,

kissed, and with his hair being ruffled repeatedly like any doting aunt on antidepressants would do.

Daphne Llefevre, who surprisingly was first to make contact, said, "Mike Miller! The worry yev put us all fru! Yeer!" and planted a big kiss on his forehead.

Abigail could only say, "Oh Mike, you're safe!" and burst into tears, but not before pulling his hair rather sharply. Madeline was supposedly hugging him but was in reality strangling him. Josh was squeezing Mike's right hand which was rapidly losing its blood supply, while Professor Creek applied equal pressure to his left. Leo, who had thought a lower approach would work, had his head jammed in the scrum, while Dutch, who had thought of a more elevated strategy, scrambled up on Josh's back. He was soon well above Mike, perched on Josh's shoulders. "Great to see ya, mate! Glad you're all right!" yelled Dutch.

Even Professor Winch had sighed, 'Oh well, when in Rome', and had joined the advance. However, his outstretched arm became painfully sandwiched in between his faster comrades who had reached Mike before him.

Professor Cornstone stood at the back of the room, arms folded and sneering. Although he knew he could not mock Professor Winch, he was certainly not going to pass up the chance of belittling Josh Beecham, and fortuitously by extension, Mike Miller.

"And what are you so excited about, Beecham?! It's only a couple of days since you've seen him!"

"Ah, get lost, Corny. I'm going with the flow. If you can't be glad he's safe, at least be glad that we're glad, or just keep it shut!"

Even Jez Gildebrand, who had not become as close to Mike as Josh and Harry Gripweed had done, was still delighted that the young lad was safe and well, and after the initial salutary blitzkrieg went over to shake his hand. The blacksmith had often told his wife after a hard day's work in the forge, that, 'I mightn't be a new man, Belle, but I'se still got a heart'. It had taken the passing of many years before Belle Gildebrand finally understood what he had meant. Such process of enlightment for the kindly lady began on one cold winter's morning. All adults from the magic community – of both school and village, and even the more robust older students, were summoned to an urgent meeting in the lounge of the Glastonbury Hotel. Once assembled, Professor Winch duly informed all present that a young female student had gone missing. She was not known to be a resourceful outdoors type, in fact she was of slight build and of frail health. And the temperature was currently minus 5 celsius and dropping. A search party was organised there and then, and less than ten minutes after the meeting had convened, several hundred people, young and old, were scouring the countryside surrounding Hemlock Village. Just over a day later, Belle Gildebrand, who had been part of a smaller group checking the school and its perimeter, walked into the forge to find her titan of a husband in tears. Jez, like the rest of the community, had been out all night but had not found the missing student. She wiped his

eyes, gave him a hug, and this gave Jez renewed vigour to stay awake all year if necessary until the poor girl was found – she was – three days later – by an exhausted Jez.

The girl had fallen down a mineshaft and was only hours from death. He climbed down, breaking his leg in the process but had battled on. He removed rock and rubble from off the girl's legs and body, made a tourniquet, fastened the girl to his back and made the arduous climb back up. It was many miles to the nearest hospital, but as they neared the village, the school nurse, Trixie Gripweed, ran out from her home to meet Jez and the injured girl. She yelled for help and the girl was saved. Jez did not like fuss, was uncomfortable at his own feast of honour, and just wanted to return to his wife, his shop, and his forge.

As for today, the less sentimental Professor Cornstone just continued to sneer at the rejoicing, adding the occasional 'Humph!' The only thing that Mike could utter, and even then only barely as he felt like the victim of a hungry python or boa constrictor, was a very gurglish 'Whoooooah!' as he and his limpet like friends began to totter and sway, but there was no stopping the inevitable. All collapsed in a heap on the floor with Mike stuck right in the middle. The merry throng began to detach themselves from each other. As they stood up and dusted themselves down, Professor Winch finally had the chance to greet Mike and to rub his painful arm.

"How are you feeling, Mike? OK?"

"Yes, Professor, fine thanks," replied Mike.

"Good! Glad to see you made it OK, and I'm sure you appreciate just how badly your friends want to see you again. (With that he rubbed his arm a little more). And I knew you would be looked after at Krickenstaltz, I had no worries on that score. So, Mike, I'm sure you would like some time on your own with your friends?" He turned to his colleagues from Hemlock Hall. "I think it's time we went upstairs. We've a lot to do."

Ezekiel, Josh, Daphne and Jez all turned to follow Professor Winch back to the conference upstairs, but not before giving Mike a hearty handshake. (Edwin had already gone).

Although no malice was meant as they all had great respect for their teaching staff – bar one, there was an air of impatience from all the youngsters as they waited for the adults to leave them alone. Finally. . .

They all sat around one of half a dozen tables placed around the room. They were actually sitting in a disused cafeteria which no doubt had met its demise through not keeping up with the times, as the decaying décor did look rather old fashioned.

"So, Mike, what's been happening? Where on earth have you been? There've been rumours flying around that you were stuck in Cricklewood, that doesn't sound that bad," said Madeline.

"Er – no, it isn't Cricklewood. It's actually in Romania, a place called Krickenstaltz."

"I knew that!" said Leo. "I was trying to tell these that I knew where you

were, but they wouldn't believe me!"

"Shut it, Fatty! You never said any such thing! Wrong as usual! Now, Mike, what's this Kricken place all about? Why are you stuck there and why can't you just come back?" asked an enthralled although surprisingly curt Dutch.

Mike was in a quandary. He knew he would have to tell them something, but as usual he was sure that he was expected not to reveal too much. He decided to wing it. He would tell them what he thought was OK to tell them, and think on the hoof should something awkward come up in conversation.

"You know I was supposed to go on this – er – Sabbaticus thingy, I—"

"Sabbatical, Mike," interrupted Abigail.

"Yeah, one of them. Anyway. . . "

"Cor!" exclaimed Dutch after thirty minutes or so and a reasonable explanation from Mike, considering the circumstances. "I'd give anything to go there! And this transmuting malarkey! Fantastic!"

"And I can't get over you coming to see us, Mike, but we couldn't see you! Amazing!" said Abigail.

"Yeah, that was – er – very strange. . ."

Upon recalling the unscheduled trip to Hemlock Hall, Mike remembered that for some reason his friends had made some less than flattering remarks about his academic capability. In short, it seemed to be that he worked hard but was an idiot. It would be a long time before Mike found out that they were lines from a play. He was thinking of mentioning all this but knew it wasn't the occasion and let it go.

"Can we have a go of your—" went to ask Leo, but was again cut off immediately by Dutch.

"Oy! Shut it, fatso! You know this and you've done that! No-one wants to know!"

Leo put up only a weak resistance to this verbal assault. "I was only going to ask—"

"Will you shut up! We're talking to Mike here!"

At this point, Mike's very recent and painful experiences concerning friendship helped him realise something was wrong, and he decided to put it right.

"Hang on, Dutch! What's your game?! You sound like Corny's long lost son! Let him speak, will you! Right, Leo, you were saying?"

"Well said, Mike!" exclaimed a delighted but nonetheless surprised Madeline.

"You've had that coming for a while, Dutch," said Abigail.

Leo seemed to shed pounds from his generous girth and add inches to his height. He beamed with delight that Mike, unlike Dutch, was treating him like an equal. Dutch was embarrassed and more importantly knew he had gone too far.

"Sorry, Leo, no call for that. Sorry, mate."

"No problem, Dutch. Er – Mike, that TMG thingy. Any chance we can have a go?"

"Not really, sorry. I wouldn't like to think what might happen if something went wrong, but you can have a look. One thing, though, don't hold it up and mention a place name, anything could happen. Here you are then, but be careful with it."

He passed the TMG to Leo, who was mesmerised by how something so ornamental looking could be so powerful.

"Incredible!" Leo passed it on to Abigail.

"It's lovely, isn't it? Mind you, it figures. All the most famous wizards used crystally things for powerful magic." She passed it on to Dutch.

"Yeah, but I bet Merlin never used one to have a bath in Fiji."

"Shhh, Mauritius, actually, Dutch," whispered Mike, easing it back out of Dutch's hands and passing it to Madeline.

"Whatever," said Dutch, who, although accidentally saying Fiji through instantly forgetting Mike's warning, was still disappointed he was not now lying on a beach on a paradise isle.

"I'm sure I've seen one of these before," said a curious Madeline, who then thought again. "but maybe not," and she passed it back to Mike.

Mike hoped that there would be no more questions concerning Krickenstaltz. He had kept his explanation as simple as possible with maybe a little white lie here and there. No mention of Zenith or Chaotagens – or anything else which threatened their very existence.

The girls, although very bright, did not seem to see any glaring omissions in Mike's explanation and were glad that all seemed well; the boys, as perhaps would be expected, just accepted all they had been told at face value. To be fair to Mike, his scanty explanation had made him more guilty of committing sins of omission than of telling any wholesale untruths. What both girls had also realised, although the lads were none the wiser, was that their tagging along with the adults supposedly in the guise of supernumerary assistants was absolute hogwash.

"Anyway, Mike, you'll soon be back in the old routine. I expect you'll be coming back with us. As a matter of fact, none of us had a clue as to why we were coming here tonight, not really. Professor Winch tried to kid us all that we were coming along to act as junior admin' assistants or something, but now I think I know the real reason. I think he wanted to cheer you up and make tonight a big surprise, for us, as well as for you. And I reckon he didn't want you turning up on your own at school, a week behind and all that, and that's why we're all together again now," suggested Abigail.

Mike had not made provision in his mind for having to explain an even longer absence. Although he felt a little awkward, he knew a little more of the truth would have to come out, but only as much as was needed for the moment.

"I'm sorry, everyone, but I'm not coming back tonight. The truth is, I don't know when I can leave Krickenstaltz."

"You're joking!" said Dutch. "Why not?!"

"Are you certain, Mike? I don't understand this. You are here with us now,

why can't we just take you back with us?" asked Abigail.

"Hmmm – I was half expecting this," mused Madeline, but before anyone could ask why, Leo, whose reasoning when it came to problems concerning magic was frequently under-appreciated, came up with his own suggestion, although not with much confidence as he thought of Dutch's probable reaction.

"Is it because a magic journey must be a round trip, Mike?"

Mike was amazed that Leo was near the mark. It was also obvious that Madeline knew something of such things, perhaps gleaned from older members of her family back home in Southport. He was certain neither knew the precise ins and outs of transmuting, but Leo had the right answer in principle.

"Yes, that's just it, Leo! Well worked out. I can't come back because transmuting is from Krickenstaltz only – and back to Krickenstaltz only. As for coming back by ordinary transport, I believe there is or was a strike right across Europe – planes, taxis, the lot. Once it's over, I expect I'll get a plane back, or at least an overland journey and then a ferry."

"But the strike is over, Mike, it finished the other day," said Leo.

"Oh," said Mike. He hoped he would not have to say any more but he knew he was somewhat cornered. He gave a sigh of resignation. "If I tell you something that's really important, will you promise to keep it a secret?"

"Of course, Mike, we wouldn't give a secret away, would we?" replied Abigail, while gesturing to the others. "

"Course not," said Dutch.

"You can count on me," said Leo.

"You can trust us, Mike, you know that," said Madeline.

"OK, but remember – no blabbing. Right – an evil, powerful wizard called Professor Zenith is in control of much of Romania." (Mike was not quite right on this, but it was how things seemed to be to him). He's put some powerful Blocking spells on magic travel, and he seems to be after me for some unknown reason. If I risked a very insecure journey by any other means than transmuting, which he supposedly does not know anything about, then he might just find me. I'm stuck in Krickenstaltz until someone finds another way of getting me home."

"So that means when we go back to Hemlock Hall, you won't be with us?" asked Dutch.

"No, sorry," said Mike who actually thought he had just painstakingly covered this point.

"So I'm only half right after all. Although this is a surprise night out, it's basically because you are stuck over there. Wait a minute! Why won't they let you stay here in Blackpool until the panic's over?" said clever clogs Madeline, or so she thought.

Mike grinned. He knew someone, most probably one of the girls would come up with this very plan.

"Sorry, no go. That's classed as a long-term transmutation and they are

not allowed, not at the moment. I believe if I did try it I would be whisked straight back to Krickenstaltz within a minute of being over my time limit. We'll just have to have a good time tonight, I'm sure it won't be too long before I'm back for good."

The friends were tiring of being seemingly stuck in this rather dusty, dark, grimy room when the night was going by, eating into their leisure time outside. Finally, the door opened and in came a delegation from Krickenstaltz.

There was Professor Ren Stannich, Marina, Laszlo, and of course a very bewildered Juliette and Vincent Stannich, who, although familiar with Blackpool, wondered why they were being taken into this rundown store room. The children from Hemlock Hall were as bewildered as their Krickenstaltz counterparts. As Mike was the only tangible link between them all he felt a little under pressure, and again began to perspire slightly. He was about to force a greeting of some kind, but Professor Stannich spoke first. "Mike, vud you be zo kind az to introduce everyvon? Zank you."

"Er – no problem, Professor. Zeez, er – ooer – er – THESE are my friends from Hemlock Hall. Meet Madeline Chalmers, Dutch France, Abigail Trent, and last but certainly not least, Leo Thorpe, who can eat for the British Isles. ('Thanks, Mike!' retorted Leo, but he smiled with it). This is Professor Ren Stannich and his children, my friends from Krickenstaltz, Juliette and Vincent Stannich. And this is Marina – er – and Laszlo."

Mike suddenly realised he didn't know either Marina's or Laszlo's surnames, but it didn't matter.

The room was soon full of friendly, varied and repeated greetings and criss-crossing handshakes, making them look like an archetypal Masonic gathering. After the hubbub died away, Marina spoke.

"Excuze me, children, but Laszlo and I vill go now. I know you probably zink you are too old to be looked after, but ve 'ave been given ze strictest instructionz to at least know ver you are, even if ve are not viz you. Ve vill be along ze prom' zumver for ze rest ov ze evening. Now, Mike, your TMG 'az been modified. Shud you need to do zo, you can simply say my name and you vill tranzmute to me and Laszlo, OK? Zo, see you later. Bye-bye."

All the youngsters said and waved goodbye; moments later all but Professor Stannich had left.

"Listen, all ov you. Pleeze be carevul, zeez are not ze most safest ov times, yez? If zer iz any bozzer at all, zen do az Marina sez. One zing more, be back by midnight, yez?"

"Yes, Father, you can trust us," said Juliette.

"Yes, Dad," said Vincent.

Although Mike's friends from Hemlock Hall felt a little strange at having new authority figures they had never met or had even heard of before, they, too, readily agreed to this. After the professor had left, Mike hoped he could find some way of breaking the ice, but this little problem was soon solved for him.

"I'm starving! Anyone for a meal somewhere?" asked Abigail.

"We've eaten, but I could manage an ice cream and a cola while everyone else gets something. Is that OK?" asked Juliette. This idea was agreed to with great enthusiasm by all.

"Er – Vincent," said Dutch, "what do we call you? Do you prefer Vince?"

"Certainly not! Master Stannich to you!"

"Oh, I didn't mean to – er – er. . . "

"Aaargh, got ya there! Yep! Vince will do nicely."

"You're a right nutter, aren't you? My proper name is Jack, but just call me Dutch."

"Where shall we go?" asked Madeline.

Mike was beaming. His nerves had vanished and the interactions so far had been far better than he'd dared hope for.

"Why don't we just bimble along the prom' until we come to somewhere nice?" suggested Mike.

There was full agreement to this and they walked out of the door and up and along the promenade. After only a minute or so, there was a shout.

"Hey! You lot! Wait for me!" It was Ellen.

Proceedings were halted while rushed introductions were made and off they went again.

The boys, perhaps deliberately, were ten yards or so ahead – laughing, joking, and dodging and weaving in and out of the huge crowd moving along both ways. They looked in on the shops and the arcades, stopped to buy some rock but changed their minds, but were then held up by Leo who went back to get some after all.

Despite it being quite cold and windy, not even howling gales can deter anyone wanting to enjoy themselves in Blackpool during the Illuminations.

The girls, perhaps deliberately, lagged behind. Ellen linked Juliette while Madeline linked Abigail, but there was still a gap between them all, but not for long. Madeline suddenly lurched to one side, dragging Abigail with her and linked with Ellen, who suddenly shouted 'Girl power!' to which there was only one answer from the other girls.

'Yeah! Girl power!'

Mike kept an eye on the restaurants as they all dawdled along the promenade. Eventually he found one which looked suitable and beckoned to the other boys to stop and wait for the girls to catch up. It was a nice little restaurant called the Happy Haddock. On the door was a picture of an inanely smiling haddock, standing almost upright out of the water.

"Happy? The only happy Haddock round here is a suicidal one," said Vincent.

Making the classic, instantaneous (and short-term) change from adolescence to young adulthood, the ducking and diving, as well as the chants relating to the progress of the modern female stopped, and the well behaved young ladies and gentlemen went into the Happy Haddock.

Leo, on the orders of just about everyone else, came straight back out

again to ditch his half-eaten bar of rock.

They managed to get a table large enough for them all to sit round. Mike, Juliette and Ellen ordered great big icecream sundaes, while the others including greedy guts Vincent, ordered fish and chips. The affected waiter, born and bred in the former textile town of Oswaldtwistle, sported a silly French accent, equally silly moustache, and had a well-combed but greasy head of hair. He hovered constantly, worried as to whether anyone was actually going to pay for this considerable feast.

"Fo, fer ar vu all vom fen?"

Of course it was Vincent yet again talking with his mouth full, but rather than immediate censuring from Juliette, there was a look of amazement from her and the others as Leo answered, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm from Leicester, Dutch is from London, Abigail is from Basingstoke, and Madeline is from Southport. What about you two?"

"Vef, ivs a vof vory, veavvy. Awvo vee are veviv, vee are affually fom Vivenvonnf. Veve vevver vivved evvy ver evs," replied Vincent.

"Really? You actually live there all the time? But what about school?"

Despite being amazed at Leo's deciphering (not realising it was simply two greedy guts together), Juliette decided to field this question and at the same time glared at her brother.

"We go to school in Wales – Abracadrystwyth High, but it's closed at the moment, redecorating or something. So Vincent and I are on extended holidays . . . wish they would hurry up though, I can't wait to get back, although Vince here hopes the place would collapse in a heap of rubble!"

"What I wish for," said Dutch, "is for Hemlock Hall to be decorated the old fashioned way. The place would be closed for months, but Professor Winch just waves his wand around and the whole place is done up in an instant. We've no chance of any extra time off."

Seeing certain similarities between Dutch and Vincent, Juliette chuckled and said, "I can see these two will get on like a house on fire!"

"Except they'll be the ones with the matches!" replied the witty Abigail. There were many merry chuckles as our little party imagined a brand new dynamic duo in reverse.

Dutch, who was equally amused, did a pointy gesture between the three younger girls.

"You three – you're not long lost sisters, are you?!"

"There is nothing wrong in wanting to get on in life, Dutch. Don't come crying to me when I'm Chairwoman of the Modern Potions Committee," joked Madeline.

"Lady Mayoress of the Magic Council for me!" chipped in Juliette.

"OK! Just so long as I can be Alderman – er – woman Trent," said a blushing Abigail.

"Huh! Committees and Mayors! Phooey! I'll make my money on the stage, just you wait and see!" retorted Dutch.

Madeline noticed that Ellen had been quiet since coming into the restaurant. Realising that Ellen was a little older, she thought maybe this occasionally made her feel left out. She gave it a try.

"And what about you, Ellen? Are you at college, or do you have a job somewhere?"

"Um — oh – er – yes, I work at Krickenstaltz in the kitchens. It's not much, but it keeps me near to Gregor – my boyfriend."

The truth was, Ellen had no problems whatsoever about being with younger people. The reason for her detachment was her thoughts. Something else was troubling her, and instead of expanding on her life at Krickenstaltz, she shared some of her concerns.

"Listen, everyone, I don't want to spoil the fun, but do any of you know exactly what is going on? I know we've all come for a night out so we can all be with Mike, but why is the Top-Deck set out for a meeting, or a conference or something? And who were all those people who turned up? This is all very odd. Even Gregor wouldn't tell me anything."

Mike, who realised a little earlier on that something important was happening back at the Top-Deck, was a little nervous as to what might be said or done next, but he kept quiet for the moment; not so Vincent.

"Funny you should say that, Ellie, Mike and I noticed something was up earlier. We can't work out why all the adults are here, and even Dad seemed worried when he was talking to Jean Michelle. I think we should ask him later if there's a problem of some sort."

Mike nearly spluttered on his cola. He had to think quickly. He knew bad things were happening and had been for some time. He hadn't even told his friends from Hemlock Hall all of what he knew, and he certainly couldn't do so now. Being economic with the truth so far seemed to have failed. There was only one thing for it – he would tell a lie, just to divert their attentions elsewhere.

"Do you know, Vince, I think we over-reacted there. I'm not supposed to tell anyone this, but they are – er – planning a new school run by the WFW instead of the Magic Council. There is fierce opposition to the idea and that's why they've had to hold an emergency conference. I think it's just coincidence that we've all been given a night out in Blackpool on the same night."

"But if you knew all this, why did you say to me before that something is wrong?" replied a confused Vincent. With his pants nearly but not quite on fire, Mike quickly but calmly and convincingly carried on.

"Because I didn't know the conference was tonight, not until now. When I was told to go down in the lift, I heard Jean Michelle arguing with some man who had just turned up. Jean Michelle told him that no way could he be a school governor because he was just too busy, and that he would officially withdraw at tonight's conference. That's probably what your dad and Jean Michelle were discussing shortly after we arrived."

"Yeah, probably," said Vincent. "That first bloke you mentioned, was he the

one all trussed up like an Eskimo?"

"Yep, that's the one," said Mike.

"That's defo it, then. Only nutters like him would want to be involved with school governors."

Mike was relieved as he thought he had got away with it. Or had he? He looked around. Dutch and Leo had not shown too much interest in what Ellen had said nor his and Vincent's replies, they were busy finishing off their meals, something which Vincent also returned to with great relish.

Mike focussed his attention on the girls. No, they had not returned to their meals. Instead, this time they were looking at him with quizzical, searching, and it has to be said – doubting looks on their faces. Abigail and Madeline were wondering just how much more Mike hadn't told them, while the equally perceptive Ellen and Juliette just knew all was not well after all. Rather fortunately, none challenged Mike to spill any more beans. As for Mike, however, he felt that as he was doing them a favour by not sharing with them what horrors the immediate future might hold, that he was justified in toughing it out. He stared back for a second and thought to himself (but unfortunately out loud), "Huh! Women!" to which Ellen immediately replied, "Huh! Men! Ask them to do something useful for once, and the answer's always 'Too busy!' Huh!"

Mike thought he had got away with it, but another look at Ellen's still suspicious face made him think that instead, he'd been quickly and cleverly been given an escape route. All in all, that was good enough for Mike.

They had almost finished their meals.

As expected, Dutch and Leo, who both had varying financial fortunes, were fidgeting uncomfortably as the time loomed nearer for paying up. Mike thought as to how he should handle it. Should he pay for the lot? Neither Dutch nor Leo would be offended, only relieved, but if he pays for Vincent as well, would his sister take offence for some reason? But Ellen came to the rescue.

"I'll get this, you lot. I rarely spend funny money and I've saved up tons. Twelve aunties, I make a fortune on my birthday!"

Mike, who was far better off than all of them and who frequently changed some of his magic fortune for funny money, felt it unfair to leave it at that.

"Okey doke. I'll get the trams, and the tickets for the funfair."

But it didn't stop there.

"No, you won't. I can't pay for the funfair for everyone, but I can get the tram fares," said Juliette.

Then. . .

"No, you won't! We'll share the tram fares," said Abigail and Madeline at the same time.

All this was readily agreed to and they trooped out of the restaurant, crossed over the road, and waited at the tram stop.

They could see a tram in the distance coming in from either Bispham or Fleetwood. They knew it would be a few minutes before it reached their stop

and this gave them the chance to take in the unique magic of Blackpool. This wasn't in the height of summer because most Blackpool summers are unfortunately poor with incessant rain and wind, but once September arrives, the weather is no longer a consideration. This is all due to the Illuminations.

It was dark in the sense that the sun had set, but the whole of the promenade was lit up with a multitude of different light displays. These are created from huge wire frames upon which are thousands upon thousands of coloured bulbs, all artfully depicting famous fictional characters, pop stars, footballers, and historical scenes. Even though it was still summer, albeit late summer, there were also a number of typical Christmas scenes. Even Blackpool Tower was brightly lit up. Although only utilised during the illuminations and maybe for the odd special occasion for the town, the tower also boasts a powerful laser projector, with its poweful green laser beam shining out for miles.

The promenade, although busy all day, had become even more crowded due to a sudden influx of people who had left their hotels and guest-houses for an evening of fun. There were also day trippers and coach parties, all eager to be part of the very special atmosphere. In its own way, less thirty degrees Celsius or so, Blackpool in September and October rivalled anything that Rio or New Orleans could produce.

The highly illuminated rocket shaped tram finally turned up and the merry band hopped on board. The three younger girls pooled the loose change from their purses and paid the fare.

Our gang of friends old and new sat on the first two rows of seats filling them up on both sides of the tram.

"Hey, Mike! Ask the conductor for a fry-up!" shouted a very cheeky Vincent who had been enthralled by Mike's tales of Wimpole's Magic Caravan.

Mike just laughed, but Leo, who wasn't as quick witted as the others, said, "You'll be lucky. I don't think ordinary folk have such things."

Vincent gave Leo a funny look. "I'm only joking, mate." And then, addressing the others, "Blimey, who have you brought with you here, Victor Meldrew?!"

To a loud volley of, 'I don't believe it!' a very embarrassed Leo kept quiet for the remainder of the journey.

A few minutes later they were at the stop for Blackpool Fair. They all got off, scurried across the busy road and congregated at the entrance. Mike looked around at the expectant faces.

"What have we stopped for? Something up? Oh, I'm paying, aren't I? Sorry, forgot!" said a smiling Mike, who had not forgotten at all.

A few minutes later, Mike, along with his much lighter wallet and the rest of the happy crew, walked through to finally begin their night of fun.

Blackpool Fair was a sea of noise. There was a strange combination of excited screams and laughter, mixed with 'Roll up! Roll Up!' type shouts from the pre-recorded fairground barker coming through the fair's PA system.

Music from 1950s rock 'n' roll through to the latest hits, blared out of huge speakers as the rides were in motion. The carnival atmosphere was embellished by real smells lingering in the air – the sickly sweet odour of fresh rock, mingled with the airborne, meaty, oniony aroma of fast food.

The girls, linking again, much to the annoyance of on-comers who had to move to one side, didn't seem to do much except chatter and laugh, and only occasionally bother with any of the side stalls. At one stall they did stop at, the coconut shy, Juliette aimed at the prizes instead of the coconuts. After smashing one small bottle of cheap perfume, Canal No. Five, a very polite assistant suggested they might like to try other stalls.

They went into an amusement arcade. All had a go of the crane, which if you are lucky picks up either sweets, chocolates, or if you are really lucky, a watch. Dutch saw this and stood behind Abigail who was doing her best to relieve the arcade of its only Rolex ladies' watch. He sneaked up and started whispering a spell which began to melt the glue which had kept the watch stuck to the bottom of the grabbing machine since 1967. Abigail couldn't believe her luck when the watch suddenly lifted up off the floor, firmly held by the crane's grabbers. By this time, the ultra-honest Madeline, totally unaware of the arcade owner's dishonesty but having seen Dutch whispering away – assumed that he was doing far more than just evening up the odds. She pretended to accidentally nudge Abigail in the arm and the watch dropped back down into the sea of plastic jewellery and boxes of candy.

"Oh . . . flippin' 'eck!" exclaimed a highly disappointed Abigail. "That was a Rolex!"

"I'm sorry, Abbers, that was really clumsy of me. I'm very sorry."

Abigail just smiled, linked her apologetic friend and followed the others who were trying to win a teddy bear on the hoop la game. They all very quickly dashed off again after Ellen had managed to wedge a hoop in the mouth of the shocked assistant.

The boys reverted to their former adolescent selves, yet again like Just William and his gang, running and weaving and dodging in and out of the crowds. They stopped to have a go at the rifle range which they all did rather well at. The trouble was the only worthwhile prize required fifty direct hits to win it, which, even if every bullet was on target, would cost a whole lot more than just buying it in the shops.

They moved on to the archery stall, complete with its mis-balanced arrows making it impossible to hit the target and win a prize. Vincent was sure he'd cracked it: he decided to aim five feet past the target, only to narrowly miss the stall owner. To angry shouts of 'Beat It!' they all ran off. They met up again with the girls and all bought an ice cream each. Leo, however, bought a huge burger with all the works as well as the largest ice cream.

They reached the dodgems and seven of the eight agreed to have a go. This was much to Leo's annoyance as he was still eating, but to such chides as, 'Serves you right, fatso' (from Dutch), he, too, struggled onto the ride. Within a minute of it starting – it stopped. All four of the boys were escorted

off the ride by an irate operator.

"For thirty years I've been telling kids like you the same thing! They are called DODGEMS, NOT BUMPER CARS! DODGEMS! DODGE — THEM! NOT SMASH 'EM BASH 'EM CRASH 'EM TRASH 'EM! GET IT?! NOW GET OFF!"

As they trooped sullenly away, the real differences between the boys showed itself. Although Mike is a little like Dutch in some ways, he is more like Leo when it comes to conduct out in the big wide world. Mike and Leo were mortified to be told off in public the way they had been and were very shamefaced. On the other hand, Dutch and Vincent could easily be taken for a couple of hard-knocks, although we know that they are not really. However, that didn't stop them all running the customary safe distance and turning and shouting back to the man. This included such retorts as: "Oy! Hitler! It's a lousy ride anyway!" from Vincent; and, "Hey! Muttley! SMASHEM BASHEM TRASHEM! And you can tell that to Dick Dastardly!" from Dutch.

"You missed out crashem," said Mike.

"And CRASHEM!" shouted Dutch, then turning to Mike, "Is that better?"

"Fine," chuckled Mike.

The girls were still on the dodgems, but they may as well not have been, as they were the very models of good behaviour. A few minutes later, they were all back together.

"That was great!" said Juliette. "What next?"

"How about one of the biggies?" suggested Mike.

"Vev, vuv ivea. I veef vee vuff fo ov ve vif viffer," suggested Leo from behind his triple half-pounder with cheese.

"The big dipper, good idea!" said Vincent.

"Yeah, why not," said Mike. "All agreed?"

"Er – well," said Juliette "I was thinking we might have a ride on the ghost train?"

"The ghost train! That's for babies. No, sorry, Sis, the biggy for me," said the indignant Vincent.

"You lot can suit yourself, we're going on the ghost train, it's a good laugh. Come on, girls!" This time it wasn't Juliette but Ellen, backing up her friend and standing up for women's rights.

Madeline, who in reality thought they were all a little old for such a harmless ride, was not going to rock the boat, or the ghost train. "Yep! Let's go!" came her cry of expedient solidarity, strongly seconded by Abigail.

The boys all looked at each other. They could quite easily have gone off by themselves but it didn't seem to be the right thing to do.

"Ghost train it is, lads. Oh, look out, there's a skeleton on strings making a silly wailing noise," said a sarcastic Mike.

"Oh, and there's his brother jumping up and laughing like a maniac," said the morose Dutch.

"OOH, I'm scared. Let me off!" mocked Vincent.

"I quite like the ghost train," said Leo, who very soon after had tomato

sauce and onions all over himself. This was courtesy of Vincent, who had slyly pushed the box holding Leo's half-eaten burger right into his face.

They queued all of eight seconds for the ghost train.

Mike was in front with Dutch, then came Juliette and Madeline, behind them were Ellen and Abigail, and Vincent and Leo sat in the rear seats of the carriage.

With a clank and a whooshing noise the train set off. It went straight into the dark tunnel and who should jump up from the side but a skeleton on strings, wailing. This was followed by his exact double, laughing like a maniac. It gathered a little speed as it began to twist, turn and bump along. It passed Dracula, just rising from his coffin on the right, followed by Frankenstein's monster who hovered to the left of the carriage.

"Technically, these weren't ghosts. Characters from horror films, certainly, but they were not ghosts . . . and I don't think Frankenstein could fly," said Leo, slipping back into the popular error of referring to Ms Shelley's monster creation by his master's name. Thankfully for the others, the deafeningly loud wailing and manic cackles meant they couldn't hear him.

They passed a rather uninspiring scene of American goldprospectors pathetically doubling up as ghosts.

"WHOOOOO! I'll hit you with me shovel!" wailed Dutch.

"MICHAEL MILLER! THERE IS NOWHERE ON THIS EARTH WHERE YOU ARE SAFE FROM ME!" said the evil Professor Zenith. . .

41

Pie in the Sky

THERE ARE RIDES which are very definitely white knuckle rides, and there are other rides. The ghost train is one of the latter – usually.

With the others oblivious to Mike's state of shock, the train trundled harmlessly past the halfway mark while the sinister mocking tones of Professor Zenith continued to taunt and haunt Mike. He sat rigidly in his seat with a fear driven cast iron grip on the bar in front. Mike's knuckles had indeed turned white. The voice continued:

"Soon, very soon, you will be mine, young Michael Miller! Soon I shall leave this cesspit that I have had to call home. Lieberman has done well! He shall be greatly rewarded for telling me of your little trip to Blackpool. Unfortunately for you, the magic of Blackpool is MY Magic. The weak Professor Winch shall forever regret not knowing this. Do you fear for your life, my young friend? Indeed you should! As we speak, my messenger is with Professor Winch and his weak old friends. He will give them an ultimatum – the Addendum – the real Addendum this time, or you will surely die! There is no hope for you or for your kind. Right this minute my own people are rising up all over the south. Our Allies from the north are already advancing on your friends. Our Allies from the east have already landed on your shores – the Warlocks of Bucharest are waiting for you, young Miller. They will be your guardians until I return in triumph – then – you and your pitiful kind will bow down to me! The British Isles will soon be mine!"

The voice stopped at the same time as the ghost train reached the end of its journey. They all climbed out, apart from Mike who was still rooted to the spot with his face as white as his knuckles. He just stared ahead and still with a tight grip on the bar.

Dutch climbed out. He turned back round to Mike and was going to ask what they should do next, but one look and he realised that there was a problem.

"Mike! What's wrong?! What's the matter? Hey, you lot! Hang on! Something's wrong here!"

The others began to run back to the platform. Dutch shouted so loudly that it was enough to jolt Mike out of his trance. He let go of the bar and turned to his friend standing by the carriage. "Dutch! Did you hear him? It was Zenith! Did you hear him?!"

But Dutch certainly had not heard Zenith, and just as Mike spoke, the

ghost train burst into life again and shot off at high-speed back into the dark tunnel. As the train hurtled along, Mike could hear shouts of panic from his friends, but only for a few seconds, and then no more.

The train sped along, faster and faster, hitting a new bend every few seconds. The carriages lurched over to one side and then the other. Each side in turn was lifted clear off the tracks while the wheels on the other side screeched and gave off sparks with the increased friction and strain.

Mike was buffeted about constantly, hitting his head on each of the side bars. His whole body was thrown forward and then back, hurting his ribs, his shoulders and his spine.

The train went even faster.

The darkness of the tunnel was usually broken by a soft orange glow from the lamps on both sides and up overhead as the train trundled along, but it was going so fast that to Mike it all seemed to fuse into one, muddy, ugly, orange twilight.

Even the different noises: the wailing, the cackling laughter, together with the chugging, whooshing, scraping and sparking of the ghost train, became one evil, cacophonic symphony of indistinguishable sound.

Despite the feelings of terror, Mike gathered his thoughts. He adjusted and reoriented himself to the frantic pattern of bends, jolts and jumps. He could see that straight ahead was a tunnel veering off the usual route for the ride. He had noticed it the first time round and realised it was a disused part of the ride or a service track of some sort. It seemed to Mike a little like one of the side roads in the Mersey Tunnel; these are a mystery to many as to where they go to or as to what they are for. As they had not veered off to go down it before, Mike did not expect to do so now. He could not have been more wrong. Geared up to carry on straight ahead, he suddenly found himself once more banging his head on the side through being thrown left as the train veered right.

Yet again the ghost train increased its speed, only this time the tracks were bent, rusty and some were even missing, making the ride even bumpier than before. A bruised and aching Mike thought it could not get any worse – it could, and it did. He could see even more turn-offs – smaller tunnels to the left and side of the track. Across the front of each one were large yellow and black striped barriers, placed there to indicate no access.

The ghost train curved right and then veered left into the first smaller tunnel, smashing right through the barrier. Jagged and uneven pieces of the yellow and black striped wood and other assorted debris flew past both sides of the carriages, but thankfully missing Mike. Just as he breathed a sigh of relief, he noticed that they were now rapidly racing towards a brick wall; this was right across the track marking the end of the line, not only for the ghost train, but, thought Mike, for him too. This was it. His whole life flashed before his eyes, but the experience was over in a flash, which is not surprising as he was only fifteen years old.

The ghost train was only seconds away from the point of impact. Mike put

his arms up in front of his face. With his head down and eyes shut, he quietly muttered, 'Help me'. Mike did not see it but a smoky, shimmery haze suddenly formed right in front of the carriage a split-second before the train smashed right through the brick wall. But instead of there now being a mangled wreck of both boy and train, the shattered bricks, pieces of mortar and other debris were all deflected by this strange gaseous-yet-solid smokescreen. The rubble thudded off and flew harmlessly along the sides and over the top.

Mike opened his eyes to see what Heaven looked like, and was not sure whether he was pleased or not that it resembled the usually unseen service area of Blackpool Fair. The smokescreen was actually a magic protective shield, courtesy of his evil tormentor who wanted Mike alive, at least for the moment, and in the clutches of his allies, the Warlocks of Bucharest. Mike was grateful he had not gone to that great funfair in the sky. Once again he repositioned himself and held on to the bar.

The ghost train left its more traditional surroundings and Mike looked down to see how the train managed to travel without being on tracks. He soon had the answer. It was hovering slightly in the air as it shot along, another piece of magic courtesy of Zenith. Mike looked ahead again.

The train left the service area, hovered right across the fairground and over towards the big dipper. Thousands of people were milling around, laughing, talking, eating and some were even running to try and catch the last ride, but no-one seemed to notice Mike or the ghost train.

As the front carriage reached the big dipper, it just went through the safety fence as if it was made of butter. The ghost train, shortly to be as one with its bigger brother, hovered along until its entire length was directly over a clear section of track. Once perfectly aligned it had no sooner dropped down and slotted into place with jolts and clanks, than it shot off along the track at such high-speed that it was soon ascending the steepest part of the ride. Mike, with clenched teeth, was forced back into his seat and found himself looking up at the stars. He felt as if his heart was in his mouth. And, yes, his knuckles were once again white but at least he was now on a ride which justified such blood-draining fear. The train was at the top. Mike closed his eyes and braced himself for the drop. It never came.

The ghost train, with a whoosh! worthy of such a word, flew straight off the tracks and high into the sky. The train slowed down slightly, banked left and straightened up. The ghost train now commenced its real journey, the one that would take Mike to his new captors.

Mike looked down. He could see the funfair but he could not make out individuals, only dots. However, he hoped that seven of those dots which were maybe his friends, had gone straight back to Professor Winch, or had at least met Marina somewhere along the Promenade to tell of his plight. Mike, remembering her words of caution, held up his TMG and shouted 'Marina!' Mike waited. Nothing.

There then came a sardonic cackle, far worse than the pathetic recordings

in the tunnel. And that voice; the voice which let Mike know that he was not about to return to Blackpool and to the comfort and safety of friendly wizards.

"Marina cannot help you, my young friend, no-one can! Tell Professor Winch, should you be lucky enough to ever see him again, there is no magic he can hide from me! I can break the Security spells on your pathetic TMGs with consummate ease! Why not transmute right now, and tell him to his face? Of course, you cannot! Accept your destiny – or die!"

There was silence, followed by Mike's TMG turning to dust in his hand and blowing away in the cold night wind, high above the Irish Sea. It was also very cold, so much so that even Mike's extra layers of thick clothing could not keep him warm. Worse still, it began to rain.

Mike pulled his hat down over his head and pulled his coat tightly around himself. To add to his woes the earlier calorific delights and belly busting satisfaction from two suppers and a ton of fairground junk food in one evening had worn off. He was hungry and thirsty.

As if someone was reading his mind – which was true – the open top and sides of the front carriage of the ghost train were suddenly enclosed by a metal frame with windows, and blasts of warm air were circulating around Mike. On the seat next to him was a plate of steak pie and chips and a hot cup of cocoa. Knowing that Zenith did not indulge in acts of kindness and was simply looking after his investment, Mike momentarily wished he had the inner strength to throw the lot out of the side, but he thought better of it and the ironically grateful Mike tucked in.

He didn't take long to finish his meal and with the warm air trapped inside the carriage, Mike could not help but go into a deep sleep.

As Mike slept, with his head back and snoring and drooling over his coat, the ghost train continued its journey southward, hugging the northwest coastline.

As is the case with Wimpole's Magic Caravan, the magic principles at play, 'though in this case formulated and applied by Professor Zenith, allowed the ghost train to either travel incredibly fast but remain visible, or to enjoy total invisibility but at the expense of speed. The evil but nevertheless level-headed Zenith had chosen the safer option.

The invisible ghost train flew, very slowly, over Lytham St. Annes, Preston, and then Southport. As Mike slept on, a voice spoke to him in his mind.

"Mike, are you OK? I must speak with you. Mike, can you hear me? Speak to me, Mike, it's Professor Winch here. Mike!"

After being informed about what had happened, Professor Winch had immediately tried to contact Mike on the telemagickeraph.

Mike eventually stirred, wiped his mouth, and sat up.

"Eh? Oh . . . it's you. What do you want?!" said Mike, rather tersely.

"I know how you must be feeling, Mike, I really do."

"Oh do you now?! I was told by everyone that I would be safe in Blackpool, but you were wrong! Everyone was wrong! Zenith has outsmarted you this time! He told me that the magic of Blackpool is his magic, whatever that means. He even said he knew all about transmuting! Next thing is, I'm being thrown about like Indiana Jones on a bad day, and then I'm flying through the air in a ghost train! And you say you know how I feel?!"

"Mike, I—"

"Ah, don't bother! Next thing you'll be telling me is, you've known all along how much Zenith knows and me being stuck up here is all part of your master plan!"

"Yes, Mike, on both counts."

"YES?!" exploded Mike. "What do you mean, yes?!"

"I mean exactly that, Mike. The only way I can finally bring about the defeat of the evil Zenith and his allies, is to let them think they have won, or at least, are winning. Unfortunately, I have to yet again call upon your brave self to help me in this.

"The irony of all this is that you are an integral part of my plan for saving the world, because you are an integral part of Zenith's plan to destroy it, or at least control it.

"Although the issue has been somewhat confused, the real truth is he needs someone from the Line of Pendragon to help him locate the Chaotagens. Even just the threat of activating one or more would be disastrous, but we have to play along – for now – and if that means he has to take a hostage, then unfortunately I can see no other way.

"I have to ask you, Mike, to be this person. You, Mike – are of the Line of Pendragon – a descendant of King Arthur. Without making Zenith think he has you in his power, then the world is indeed doomed. It is better that we manipulate a hostage known to us, into his hands. If we were not able to do this, Zenith would just keep on trying until he found someone else of the royal line, maybe someone unknown to us. This way we can end the uncertainty and bring matters to a head."

Mike was astounded. "I AM OF THE LINE OF PENDRAGON?! A RELATIVE OF KING ARTHUR?! Why didn't you tell me this before?!"

"Because, Mike, you were not ready to be told, not until now."

Mike did not quite hear Professor Winch's reply as something was niggling away at the back of his mind; then it came to him. "Pendragon! That's it! Pendragon! Professor Pendragon! Er – Professor Winch, does that mean that Professor Pendragon is also related to King Arthur?"

"Yes, it does, Mike, and obviously it also means that both you and Aloy – er – the Professor, are yourselves related to each other. By my calculation, although I could be wrong, you are eighty-ninth cousins, three-hundred and one times removed."

But Mike could not have cared less if they were googol cousins a googolplex removed. Professor Pendragon was of Arthur's line and that's all he needed or wanted to know at this point.

"Professor, seeing as his name is still Pendragon while mine is Miller, does that mean he is even more closely related to King Arthur than I am?"

Professor Winch knew where this was going, and sighed. "Yes, Mike, but—"

"Well – er – as much as I would like to help (lied Mike), wouldn't it be more appropriate for Professor Pendragon rather than me, to be Zenith's hostage?"

"Yes, it would, Mike, but have you forgotten? Unfortunately after dropping you off at the Academy at Krickenstaltz, nothing has been – er – seen or even heard of the Professor since that day. If there was any other way, Mike—"

Mike the Valiant then came to the fore. "No, it's all right, Professor, it's OK. It's not as if I can just jump off and come back, eh? Or have you flying on a broomstick and plucking me out of the sky and to safety? I'm stuck with it, aren't I?"

Mike thought he heard someone feign static interference on a radio, possibly by using a little spittle and jamming his tongue through his lips and going SSSCCCHHSSSCCCHHHH, but Mike knew Professor Winch wouldn't do that and settled on it being real static interference.

"Sorry, Mike, didn't catch that. Interference, you know."

Mike was also feeling rather guilty about something. Since his arrival at the Academy, he had not thought much about his new acquaintances Barry Wimpole and Fred Marsh, and of course, Professor Pendragon. The only time he had done so was when he had imitated Barry's less than perfect English to get a few cheap laughs over dinner one night with Vincent and Juliette. He was about to put things straight and ask Professor Winch about them all, but again, something was nagging at him at the back of his mind, something which he thought was important but he didn't know why; then he remembered.

"Professor, there's something else, a couple of things actually. Zenith mentioned that it was – er – Lieberman, I think it was, who told him I was in Blackpool. Then there was something about wanting the Addendum back, the real Addendum? Does all this make any sense?"

This time there was no interference, real or spittle fuelled, just a few seconds silence. Mike thought he'd lost him. "Professor?"

"Yes, Mike, still here . . . interesting that, very interesting. However, it does not concern the here and now."

"I don't understand, Professor? What do you mean, exactly?"

"I mean, Mike, that at the moment you only have to concern yourself with staying safe and well. Do as your captors tell you, and when the time is right we will make our move. I promise you that you will be back at Hemlock Hall before you can say Jack Robinson."

"Jack Robinson?" said Mike, who surprisingly had never heard of such a saying.

"Ha ha! Very funny! At least you haven't lost your sense of humour! Really, though, you will get through this, Mike, I give you my solemn promise or my name's not Professor Winch."

Mike remembered the episode with the budgerigar. "And are you Professor Winch?"

"Not that again, Mike, no time!"

Mike, resigned to it not making that much difference anyway, discontinued his musing over the possibility that he was being duped.

"There is one thing more, Professor, if both you and Zenith can contact me up here, how come he hasn't overheard you talking to me?"

"Where did you say you got your degree in Magic, Mike?"

"I haven't got a degree in Magic."

"Bye for now, Mike, keep your chin up!"

"Bye, Professor, and thanks!" said Mike. And, keeping it to the darkest, furthest recesses of his mind, hopefully out of reach of even the cleverest of mind readers, Mike said to himself, "Sly old dog!"

"I heard that!"

"Don't tell me – the telemagickeraph mark – er – six!"

"Seven!"

Professor Winch was finally gone.

Mike had not noticed, but the train had been gradually reducing height and had moved in from the coast by about a mile. While Mike mused on what he had just heard, the ghost train landed in a farmer's field in the little town of Thornton, just outside Liverpool.

42

A Barn Stormer

(From this chapter on there is occasional dialogue involving various warlock characters. They are speaking in their own language when talking to each other, but for the convenience of readers, English has been used here for involved / important conversations, but accents and pronunciations are maintained). Minor dialogue may be entirely in the warlocks' own language).

WITH A GENTLE WHOOSHING NOISE, the ghost train finally landed twenty or so feet away from a dilapidated farmhouse and outbuildings at the end of the farmer's field. It was still the dead of night, but a clear sky and a bright full moon had created a false dawn.

Mike looked out the window which was part of the extras so considerately conjured up by Zenith. He strained to see two shadowy figures lurking about and looking over, as if they were searching for something – or someone.

One of the figures, a particularly scruffy warlock called Gervid, raised his arm and held up something which Mike could not see clearly. Gervid had raised his battle-wand. He then shouted something which Mike heard but did not understand.

The battle-wand then displayed one of its alternate properties to its traditional usage, which was usually to inflict pain and death and bring about chaos. On this occasion it gave out nothing more than light, just enough for Gervid and his cohort, Zadzuk, to spot Mike still peering out of the window desperately trying to make out where he was and what was going on.

Mike saw Zadzuk gesture to Gervid to stand back. Zadzuk raised his own battle-wand and pointed it directly at the front carriage. Mike may not have experienced being on the receiving end of a battle-wand death-bolt before, but seeing Gervid retreat to a safe distance, he guessed that whatever was going to happen was not going to be pleasant.

Zadzuk thrust out his arm, shouted, '*Kazashzkaboom!*', and a streak of blue lightning shot out of the battle-wand. Mike ducked and once again put his head in his hands. The whole carriage shook as the blue light tore into the carriage door, wrenching it from its hinges and blasting loose the front bar, which then hit our reluctant hero hard on the head, knocking him out cold.

Zadzuk and Gervid, grinning from ear to ear, ran over to the carriage to inspect their handiwork. They tried to wave away the smoke but coughed as the stench of burnt rubber and melting plastic, as well as the choking chemically stink from the smouldering paint of the metal frame hit the back

of their throats and filled their nasal passages.

It was now clear enough for the two warlocks to see Mike, slumped sideways and with a badly gashed head. As they found this to be highly amusing, both merrily chuckled away as they unceremoniously pulled Mike out of the wreckage and commenced dragging him along the ground. Their orders were to get Mike to the farmhouse as soon as possible – and to make sure he was not harmed.

Mike was dragged along a bare, uneven rocky path, sandwiched in between the perimeter fencing and the field of long neglected crops. Most of the crop plants had become overgrown and seedy, the rest were just rotting stumps in the ground.

They soon reached the first outbuilding. When the farm was still operational this had housed a plough and tractor for working the crops; they were still there but had rusted away, a decaying monument to better times, at least for the farmer.

They walked on with Mike still out cold, and with his head getting bumped, cut and pounded every inch of the way.

To the right just before the main farmhouse was a barn. This, along with the rest of the farm, had long been abandoned by the last incumbent but was used by other local farmers and crofters as a handy overflow, allowing the storage of several tons of hay. However, it was currently doubling up as accommodation for the rest of Kerantzky's men. Most of these were sleeping off hangovers, some were propped up against the walls, others were on top of a large hay stack which occupied a good half of the barn, and some were even right in the middle of it.

There were two, however, who were still wide awake. They were sitting on hay-bales on either side of the entrance. There had been a barn door at one time but years of neglect had resulted in a big gaping hole where the door once was. They took swigs from their bottles of whisky and grinned as they saw their comrades bringing in a prisoner.

If Mike had been conscious he would have been able to witness the ensuing inane banter between the two pairs of Warlocks, centring on the whisky swilling couple crowing over their not having to carry out such menial tasks as Mike's two escorts. But one snide comment too many incensed Gervid. He let go of Mike's arm and began to stride over to the main antagonist, who upon seeing this decided he was after all more interested in his whisky than in any other odd goings on, and waved Gervid and Zadzuk away. "Aaargh, schnuzzicky," was his parting shot, as he smiled drunkenly at his friend, lifted his bottle and took another swig. Gervid stopped, thought for a second, made a rude finger gesture, and turned and ran back to catch up with Zadzuk who had mercilessly carried on dragging the still unconscious Mike over the rough ground.

With the imbalance of being dragged by only one arm, Mike rolled violently from side to side and was very lucky not to have broken his arm. He probably still would have done had not Gervid finally caught up and lifted and

pulled Mike's arm to restore some sort of balance.

They reached the porch of the L shaped farmhouse which was lit up by night torches hung on the front wall either side of the door.

A guard held out his battle-wand and shouted, "Rezcvinnexxich? Griop unzz schfickmaggon?!"

Zadzuk grinned and answered back, "Trapzen-scumzen Mike Miller wertgyyuinplickzx, muntagotrimczesta, fereq!"

The guard smiled. "Aaar, Mike Miller, fereq, fereq!" He opened the door and stood aside to let them through with their prize.

Mike was dragged along the hallway, straight through the open connecting door and into the main room of the farmhouse.

This was the only room downstairs. The kitchen and eating area was at the end with the connecting door, and a living area with two tatty armchairs and a flea ridden sofa positioned around the fireplace was at the other.

Zadzuk started swinging on Mike's arm, gesturing for Gervid to do the same.

"Bazickz! Gajjazz! Krelee! Truzump!" and with that, Mike was flung to the floor in front of the fire.

Gervid and Zadzuk were highly satisfied with their work so far and thought it would greatly please their master. They resumed their crowing just as Kerantzky came in from the hallway.

Kerantzky looked at the bruised and battered body of Mike Miller, still unconscious and lying on the floor.

"Vot iz ziss, you idiotz?! Ve are not to 'arm ze boy in any vay! Vich one ov you did ziss?"

The unguffawing Gervid and Zadzuk, now cowing instead of crowing, said nothing – but each managed to shakily point a finger at the other. Looking after your comrades is not high on the list of priorities for warlocks, especially when it comes to warlocks of the lowest order upon incurring the wrath of their leader, Kerantzky.

Unfortunately for them, on any other occasion Kerantzky himself would have happily dreamed up untold tortures for Mike, but when the chance to be in on the ruination of the world presents itself, it is wise to obey the one holding most of the cards – or more accurately in this case, the most important card; this was of course, Professor Gemini Zenith, who held the Book of Chaotagens. Without the book, the recently acquired Chaotagen Wand was useless to its present guardian, Kerantzky, and of course, both were useless without a very much alive scion of the House of Pendragon.

Kerantzky's face was that of evil driven fury as he accused his two minions of gross incompetence.

"Ziss scum iz ze von person capable ov releasing ze Chaotagenz! 'E iz no use dead!"

"But 'e iz not dead, O' great one. Ve only knocked 'im on ze 'ed!" pleaded Gervid.

"I can bring 'im round if you vIsh, my mazter," said Zadzuk, lifting his

battle-wand in readiness to utilise one of its gentler restorative functions.

Kerantzky stopped, thought for a moment, and smiled. He looked first at Gervid and then at Zadzuk.

"Arrch! You ver not to know ziss. Relax, boze ov you, you vill 'ave nozzing to vurry abouten. Here, I vill do ziss. Pass me your battle-vond, yez?"

Both cowardly warlocks gave huge sighs of relief as Zadzuk passed his battle-wand to Kerantzky.

"Zank you, my mazter." – "Yez, oh, mercivul von. Zank you."

Kerantzky raised the battle-wand and pointed it directly at Mike. The other two could not see his face, but it wore a devilish grin. He span round on his heels and pointed the wand at Gervid.

'Trechnikavich Karavanschka! Excrucio Infinitum!'
(May all who disobey, travel the road of eternal agony).

A triple blast of lightning left the battle-wand. This was one of the warlocks' famed range of deadly killing spells – the triple death-bolt.

A deep red, murderous thunderbolt zapped Gervid in the forehead at exactly the same time as a bright orange flash ripped right through his chest.

The third flash of blue lightning did not break off from the battle-wand, but was like a supersonic stream which rapidly coiled and enveloped the now limp, lifeless body of Gervid, sprawled over the sofa with his tongue hanging out to one side from his twisted mouth.

The blue lightning turned into a roaring red inferno. Gervid was burnt to a crisp.

No sooner had the impromptu cremation come to a ruthlessly efficient conclusion, than the window of the farmhouse crashed open and a ghostly whirlwind flew in, whipped up the ashes of the late Gervid, and spiralled straight back out again.

The window slammed shut.

Zadzuk stood there trembling. Kerantzky turned to face him and gestured with the battle-wand, as if in thought as to its next use. Zadzuk began to plead for his life.

"P-P-Pleeze, mazter, it vill not 'appen again. Ve ver – I voz only—"

Kerantzky did not want to hear any more. "Go! Join your comrades! Tell zem ze price ov such stoopidity!"

"Zank you, mazter, zank you!" said the now kneeling supplicant Zadzuk.

Zadzuk hurriedly rose and was about to rush out of the room.

Unfortunately for Zadzuk, he did not see that Kerantzky had after all re-raised the battle-wand in anger. He held it right up in the air and brought it down in a deliberate arc shaped motion. A huge thunderclap heralded the release of a broad, bright, silver coloured flash, shimmering sharply around its edges. This was the infamous Crescent Death-Slice. With a high-pitched whizzing sound a little like a dentist's drill, the ghostly crescent passed right through Zadzuk and just faded away once beyond the now very dead

warlock. Zadzuk had been neatly sliced in half.

Kerantzky initially decided to leave Zadzuk exactly how he was and where he was as an incentive for his other minions to obey, but he realised that if he was to somehow put his young hostage at ease, this would not do. He casually took a swig of beer from a mug on the kitchen table and then summoned once more the ghostly cremator and undertaker.

Once again there was a roaring inferno followed by the devilish whirlwind.

The window slammed shut for the second time, rousing Mike out of his uneasy sleep. He leaned on his left elbow, pushed down with his left hand and began to rise, while at the same time rubbing his throbbing and still bleeding head with his right hand. How he wished he was only in Krickenstaltz falling over his furniture. Kerantzky helped Mike up and sat him down in one of the armchairs.

Mike, still groggy, barely knew what was going on. Kerantzky stood with his hands on his hips, grinning at Mike, who looked curiously and fearfully at him in return.

"Ah, my young friend iz coming round. Velcome to my temporary headqvarters, Mike Miller. I apologize for ze behaviour ov zose two idiotz. Zey vill not bozzer you again."

"Wh-where am I? Am I back in Romania?" stammered Mike.

"Ha! Zo you zink zer iz nozzing but ze crummy old farmz in Romania? You are still in your own country, my young friend. Vot iz zort ov az disuzed farm by ze localz, iz ver ve vill begin our schveeping ov ze country until it iz ourz!"

"Yes, but where are we exactly?" asked Mike, who had not asked for a pre-victory speech. "And who are you?"

"I believe ve are in Zornton, a little suburb ov ze Liverpool. You know, ze Bottelz or zum such tripen. And I am Kerantzky, gloriuz leader ov ze Vorlockz ov Bucharezt."

Mike had to think before making any further comment. He was pretty sure Kerantzky meant the Beatles – but Zornton? His geography of smaller towns in Great Britain was reasonable, but he had never heard of Zornton; but then he had a thought. "Do you mean Thornton, near Crosby?"

"Zat iz vot I sed. Yez?"

"Er – yes," replied Mike the diplomat. Mike just sat and looked at Kerantzky, wondering and worrying as to what would happen next. Although Kerantzky was looking directly back at him, Mike knew that his mind was elsewhere.

Kerantzky scratched his chin and put his filthy hand through his equally filthy, greasy hair. A few moments later he scratched his chin again, and nodded to himself as if he had come to some sort of decision.

"Ziss iz vot ve vill do, my young friend. You vill get zose cutz seen to and you vill rest. You vill need it. Zingz 'az changed rapidly. You now 'ave a very long trip to make later. Now vait 'ere for ze moment, pleeze."

Kerantzky went out to the guard at the front door, who stood still, straight, and held his battle-wand diagonally across his chest in salute. Kerantzky

barked out his instructions.

"Krrulzecknvil zackenurzevech zefrauzinken, Estella Grant. Schnacken schnacken, fereq!"

"Ja meinz Keranckza, ivozz grogger, fereq!" replied the guard, which was an understandable retort under the circumstances.

Mike was mystified. However, unintelligible ramblings aside, he had heard something he did understand – the name of Estella Grant. He heard the name a second time, yet again in the midst of some hybrid Germanic/Slavic gobbledegook.

The guard had approached the two warlocks who had earlier mocked Gervid and Zadzuk, and had given them the job of fetching an ally of the warlocks, a lady by the name of Estella Grant to come and tend to Mike.

After having their whisky bottles confiscated they climbed over the fence and onto Walkells Road.

Mike felt sick, sore, and very, very tired. He went back into the deep sleep which had earlier been disturbed by the ever enigmatic Professor Winch.

Twenty minutes later, although to Mike it only seemed ten seconds, he was woken by someone gently rocking his shoulder and saying his name.

"Mike. Wake up please, Mike. Come on now, let's get you fixed up. Mike, come on now, wake up. Mike. Mike!"

"Wha-what's goi— Estella?!" said the waking Mike. Before him stood a woman, smartly dressed, long brown hair, with a roundish face. It was none other than Madeline's Aunt Estella, whom Mike had met a few times during visits to Madeline's family.

"Shhhh! Listen, Mike, this is very important. You don't know me, OK? You must remember that. Kerantzky will be back any moment, so I will say this quickly. I am not what I will seem to be when Kerantzky or his men are around. Whatever happens from now on, I will be keeping an eye on things. Trust me."

"What are you on abou—" went to ask a highly confused Mike, but Estella stopped him.

"Shhhh, here he is. Remember, trust me, no matter what."

Before Kerantzky re-entered the room, she kissed Mike gently on the cheek which made him blush.

"'Ello, Eztella, my favourite traitor! Vill ze boy live, zen?" Kerantzky asked jokingly as he strode back into the kitchen.

"Huh! Your two buffoons nearly killed the deal before we could make it! Where are they, by the way, or need I ask?" She looked directly into Kerantzky's eyes. "Hmmm – silly question. As for the Miller boy, apart from a gash on his head and a few bumps, he'll live, until he has played his part, eh?"

"Zat iz none ov your bizness! Just you make him able to travel long diztanz tonight. Feed him and make sure he iz vell, uzzervize. . . ?"

"Otherwise what, fatso? Otherwise what?! If I get one word out to Zenith you are threatening me, the deal will be off for all of us!"

This was a big risk on Estella's part as Kerantzky had never been known to think rationally whenever he was being challenged, but it was a risk Estella had to take to validate the pretence of allegiance to Zenith and indirectly to the warlocks. She was also very worried for Mike. She did not realise they were planning to move on so soon, and certainly not out of the country as she surmised they were now going to do, and taking Mike with them.

What made matters worse was that she was under orders not to interfere or to hinder the warlocks in any way, unless of course, Mike's life was in imminent danger. She had to continue to play it on the hoof.

"A bit risky going so soon, isn't it? The WFW and the Magic Council are not daft, you know. Any sign of movement by either us or yourselves will be noticed. All routes to Romania will be under particular surveillance."

"And vot iz zat to do viz you? Listen, lady, your job 'ere and now iz to see to ziss scum! 'E iz our trump card. I vill not say ziss again. See to ziss piece ov filth, and zat iz it!"

Estella knew she couldn't pull the I'll tell Zenith gag again, but she had to try and gauge from the limited conversation whether it was indeed Romania that Mike was being taken back to. There was enough of an aggressive reaction from the not always perceptive Kerantzky that she had guessed right, especially as he had not corrected her on her choice of country.

What was more disturbing to Estella was the realisation that Zenith's plans had changed. Previous intelligence had not hinted at this. However, it was now very obvious to Estella that very recent and dramatic changes to both logistics and tactics had indeed been made, but frustratingly she did not know why. Moreover, she suspected that even Professor Winch would be stuck for an explanation; still, she had her orders.

Kerantzky once more left the room. Once he was out of sight, Estella quickly took something out of her coat pocket.

"Here, Mike, take this, it might help you. Put it in your pocket and don't let them find it."

Mike took it off her. It was a small, solid, round crystal ball. "What's this for, it's not a TMG is it?" asked Mike with a wry smile, upon being presented with yet another magic crystal.

"It's a Knowglow, Mike."

"It's a what?!"

"Ssshh! Just keep it safe, you'll know when and how to use it."

Estella suddenly remembered the very reason she had been sent for, and set about patching up her young charge the best she could. For the very bad gash she used something called Magicrem, which healed up the wound in seconds. This was after first removing the ugly lumps of congealed blood and soil spattered over Mike's head and face as a result of his undignified drag across the field. For the minor cuts and bruises she used good old fashioned Germolene, plasters, and bandages.

"You're not a doctor as well, are you?" asked Mike.

"As well as whom, Mike?" asked an amused Estella.

"Oh, no-one," sighed Mike who thought it too trivial to explain a certain similarity as to when he was being patched up by Ernst Stannich.

"No, I'm not a doctor, but I was a nurse once. That's why Kerantzky called for me to help," continued Estella. "Right! You're done. I would suggest you go upstairs and have a lie down. I'll bring some food round later. I can't have you eating the muck this lot eat. OK, Mike, bye, see you later." Estella left the farmhouse and returned home.

Mike stayed where he was for a few minutes rather than go with Estella's suggestion, as he was not certain how Kerantzky would react upon his return. Maybe he would assume Mike was trying to escape, but he was still very tired and he needed a proper bed, not a lumpy old armchair or sofa. He'd had enough. He got up, walked back down the hallway and was about to climb the stairs when the guard outside peered in through the vestibule window and shouted something. To Mike, this sounded like, "Gezzunken schmazz, kereq?" He narrowed it down to one obvious question: where are you going? Mike feigned a yawn, clasped his hands and placed them beneath his bent head. The guard smiled, and said mockingly, as you do, "Aaarg, gunff hozzer meshanter, keraqqiwaq!" and returned to his mind-numbing guard duty.

Mike went on up the stairs. He expected to find the master bedroom formerly belonging to one Farmer Giles or whoever, complete with a huge feather bed, big and strong enough to take the weight of both the farmer and his red-cheeked, amply proportioned wife. He was in for a shock. The two larger bedrooms had been used as a rubbish tip for years, and the third, a tiny box room, just had room for a small child's bed. This came with a tatty mattress, broken springs and one of the legs missing. The only blanket, filthy at that, had been thrown on the floor. Upon hearing Mike, a variety of bugs decided to vacate their warm nest and scurry away under the gap in the skirting boards. One look – and Mike decided he was not going to get undressed, and he was certainly not going to sleep under the blanket.

He pulled his over-large outdoor coat close-to, fastened the zip and all the buttons, and even put his hood up. Mike climbed onto the bed, lay on his side, put his knees up to his chest and commenced trying to get some sort of a worthwhile sleep. Just as Mike was drifting off, he heard (and felt) a crunching, splintering sound as the other three rotten bed legs gave way and the bed thudded to the floor. Mike sighed, closed his eyes, and was very soon snoring heavily and dreaming of becoming Captain of the England footy team.

Not long after, Mike was yet again disturbed from his slumber. "Mike, it's time to use your Knowglow. Use it now!"

"Huh!" said Mike to himself. He opened his eyes and looked around. There was no-one there. Mike was not surprised as he realised the voice had come from inside his mind, but it was not his own voice, it was Estella's.

Mike dutifully took out the Knowglow. He held it up and said to himself, 'What am I supposed to do now?' With that the Knowglow gave off a dim

light which expanded and filled the room, with the light growing brighter and brighter.

Images began to form in the centre of the room. Mike could see Kerantzky, sitting downstairs; he seemed deep in thought. Mike now felt as if he was sitting right next to the evil warlock but somehow remaining unnoticed.

Kerantzky was visualising the destruction of the world, and he even smiled to himself at his secret plan to depose Zenith once the warlocks and The League of Mordred had gained global domination. He was leering to himself over this when the guard from the door ran in, summoning his leader.

"Mazter! Mazter! You 'ad better come and see ziss. It iz terrible! Come now, pleeze!"

Kerantzky was jolted out of his fanciful hopes and ran to the door. The guard pointed up to the sky and he and Kerantzky began to follow the erratic trail of someone in the air, but very much in trouble.

Mike, who had immediately followed, also saw this strange spectacle. It was a warlock on a broomstick.

As it was daylight, Mike could see that the warlock's clothes were badly torn and that he was badly injured. He was cut all over and was just about managing to stay on the broomstick, which then went into an involuntary tailspin and was rapidly plummeting towards the farmer's field. It crashed in the field with a mighty explosion. This was due to the warlock's battle-wand, already damaged, hitting the ground with tremendous impact.

Kerantzky shouted over to the barn and gave orders for his hay chewing minions to bring the distressed warlock in from the field. They ran out to the crash site and found their dying but not dead comrade lying on the ground, groaning incomprehensibly. He was carried into the farmhouse and was placed on the sofa.

Kerantzky poured out some beer into a mug, picked up an ordinary wand and tapped on it three times, muttering, 'Extensikazum Mortoziv Knasjka!'

Mike followed the crowd, and he too looked on as Kerantzky ordered one of his minions to make the dying warlock take the beer now magic potion. After three sips, he coughed, gurgled and with wild, demented, bloodshot eyes, shot straight up and grabbed hold of Kerantzky's tunic.

"Ve ver – ve ver set up! It voz terrible! Vinchy knew ov our plan! Ve ver – ver – ver. . . "

The warlock said no more, his grip on Kerantzky's tunic loosened and he fell back, dead. Kerantzky knew that he had been too badly injured to save, but had been able to extend his life just long enough to get some idea of what had happened.

Kerantzky turned his back on his men, muttered some terrible curse and went over to the table and repeatedly banged his fists down on it.

"Schnizzkzevof! Der interfenz dezeegenshtick Vinchy zer scumzencackaz cajozeckmaj zzakanczhaken! Aaargh!"

Mike was afraid. He had overheard the dying man, worked out that the warlocks had been outsmarted in some way by Professor Winch, and

Kerantzky was obviously screaming for blood-curdling revenge which may well start with him. The only good thing was that despite Mike forgetting about it in his fear, no-one could see him.

A few moments later the room started to go all hazy around him. As the mist cleared he again saw Kerantzky, this time sitting with Estella Grant, around the badly splintered kitchen table.

"Really, it's just your pride that's the problem here. There are always reversals in war, Kerantzky, you know this. So they won this battle? You still have the wand, we still have the book – and once we get that yard of pump-water called Miller out to Zenith, we will still be victorious. So I say it's only a minor setback."

Kerantzky began to unnerve Estella as he had not really taken any of this in. He looked at her strangely.

"Zer iz zumzing else. Last night's defeat voz partly due to ze problem ov spying in your camp. Ze idea voz for Zenith to come to England and direct ze battle 'imself. Zen 'e voz to travel to Zornton, take ze Miller scum and zen find ze Chaotagenz vile ve annihilatedz ze WFW. Ziss 'olding zis filth for ze Addendink iz just bonus. 'Owever, your friend Lieberman told Zenith not to do ziss az 'e 'az found out zer iz spying going on. Ve 'ad no chance wizout all ov our allies and becoz ov ziss, ze leadership ov boze ze WFW and ze Magick Council are still alive.

"But you are right, ov courze, it iz only setback, not total defeat. Ze killing ov Profezzor Vinch and his tired, veak, little friends voz going to be – 'ow you say – ze zuker on ze pumpernickel? Yez? But no matter, zat scum upstairs goes wiz us – TODAY!"

Estella gulped involuntarily. Thankfully, Kerantzky did not notice this, although he had been eyeing her suspiciously for some time. She was worried, and rightly so. If she was rumbled, who would keep an eye on Mike? If they managed to steal Mike away, would there be time for her real friends and allies to stop them releasing the first Chaotagen? What was she to do next?

"Miss Grant, you must stick to the original plan, it is the only way." It was Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph. He continued: "You must remember that all three components must be brought together to the one place and at the same time . . . this is not and will not be as easy as any of our evil adversaries think it is, or ever will be, please believe this. More importantly, please ensure that nothing – I repeat – nothing – stops Mike from being held as a hostage, for now at least. Do I have your solemn promise on this?"

"Yes," said Estella.

"Yez, vot?!" retorted Kerantzky.

"Sorry, my fault," said Professor Winch. "Thank you, Estella, yet again. Goodbye for now."

Although Mike had not been privy to this short interlude between Professor Winch and Estella, he was then brought into the conversation.

"Hello, Mike, just a quickie. Please give Miss Grant her Knowglow back. (He said this with a chuckle in his voice). I'm in charge here and I'll decide what I think you should know!"

The images began to fade and the misty haze returned once more.

Mike found himself drifting up and away from the table, and back up to the tiny bedroom where he soon returned to his slumber.

A few hours later Mike woke with a start. He was being prodded with the maggot-ridden end of an old yard brush. It was a warlock he had not seen before.

"Jschekezze! Kereq! Kereq!"

"If that means get up, then OK, OK, I'm up." grumbled Mike, as he struggled to rise from the debris that was once a child's bed.

He was led downstairs at brushpoint. Mike was jokingly going to raise his arms but thought better of it, and walked on down and back into the living room.

Just as he was about to sit down, he saw someone at the far end of the room holding a frying pan. Thinking that yet again household implements were being used as threatening weapons, he was about to ask, 'Where to now?', when he noticed it was Estella, cooking a fry-up.

"Hello, Mike, sit down at the table, this is almost done. And make sure you eat it all, you'll need it."

Mike went across to the kitchen table and sat down. A minute or so later Estella came across to serve him his meal. Mike realised that his guard had resumed his duties at the front door and so quickly took out the Knowglow and handed it back to Estella. "Here, you'd better take this back before I get into trouble."

"Erm – yes, OK, Mike, but I'm sure you found it useful, eh?" and gave him a knowing smile.

Just as Mike was about to put a lovely sizzling piece of best-back bacon into his mouth, there was an almighty explosion. The whole house shook, the walls cracked and timbers from the ceiling fell down, narrowly missing both Mike and Estella. Mike was scared. Whoever it was this time, whether his own side or otherwise, certainly meant business.

There was a second explosion, then a third, each preceded by strange whistling noises. After each impact, the whole house lit up in an array of colour Mike had not seen the like of before.

Mike and Estella held hands and made their way out of the house. The guard was lying dead across the porch-way and the barn was on fire. The warlocks who could get out, ran over to the other outhouses. They regrouped behind the tractor shed and were quickly joined by their leader.

Estella and Mike were stood in the middle of the yard, not knowing what to do or where to go, but Estella remembered she had a job to do.

"Quick! This way, Mike!" and began to pull him over to where the warlocks had sheltered from the bombardment. Just as they began to run they heard whooshing noises overhead.

They looked up and there were about thirty wizards in battle robes on broomsticks, flying low over the farm and releasing thunderbolts with their own battle-wands. They flew in lines of five over the outhouses and pointed their wands downward at the enemy. These seemed to be even more powerful than the warlocks' battle-wands. Each time they fired no less than ten different blasts left the wands, all in the space of a mili-second.

The warlocks retaliated, but each time they fired, their targets expertly manoeuvred out of the way. Seven warlocks lay dead on the ground. Kerantzky was losing men fast and he knew he had to do something. He then remembered something which may just help.

When looking around the farmhouse shortly after arrival, he had uncovered a passage behind the over-large fireplace. He had been informed by one of his brighter minions (a rare animal indeed), that it was a very old escape tunnel and that it had been used by warlock raiders many years before but had yet to be rechecked for current use – but Kerantzky knew it was all he had, and it might, just might protect them from this onslaught. He signalled to his men to go back, pointing to the badly damaged farmhouse. They each gave each other a quizzical look, but none dared to disobey.

With Kerantzky going first, they made a dash for it, clambering over the debris and choking on the smoke from the blazing barn. Kerantzky made it back, along with thirty-one of his men, although many more were trapped out in the open still. By then, the airborne wizards had repositioned themselves into two groups, each fifteen broomsticks wide. They were hovering opposite each other, relentlessly firing their battle-wands, which made it impossible for anyone else to make it back.

Five more warlocks died where they stood, trapped in the open. The remainder ran off, spreading themselves out over the field and laying down in the overgrown and sadly long-untended corn, hoping they would not be seen.

But what of Mike and Estella? They tried again and again to run and hide behind the tractor shed, but each time they did so, battle-wands were fired, not directly at them, but all around them like warning shots. They were rooted to the spot. Mike just thought they had been lucky, but Estella managed a grim smile. She knew that they were indeed warning shots, but didn't know whether to be thankful or annoyed as she knew she would have a problem with Mike's would-be rescuer – whoever that person turned out to be. . .

The wizards ceased fire. They regrouped again, hovering in the air in a circle. There were voices. They were too far above Mike and Estella for them to hear exactly what was said, but it was obviously an agreement that the engagement was over, as all but one of the wizards flew off back to whence they came.

Estella had only one chance to obey her orders. "Kerantzky! Come and get Mike!"

Mike could not believe his ears. Estella was on their side! But now was not

the time to dwell on such treachery.

As the lone wizard swooped down to try and reach Mike, a warlock ran out from the farmhouse and grabbed Mike by the arm trying to drag him back in. Mike resisted and tried to wrestle free from his captor.

The wizard landed, ran across, thumped the warlock in the head and he, too, grabbed Mike, but to try and get him away from danger. The warlock quickly jumped up, pointed his battle-wand at the wizard, but then in a flash of light, fell down dead. Kerantzky, who had appeared in the doorway, was certainly not going to risk his investment, even if it meant killing one of his own.

Kerantzky lowered his battle-wand, and smiled. "Kill him, Eztella. Ve 'ave got to go!"

Kerantzky could so easily have done the honours, but he wanted to test Estella's loyalty.

The wizard let go of Mike and looked around. He looked back and saw Estella Grant pointing a battle-wand directly at his heart. Josh Beecham looked deep in the eyes of his childhood sweetheart. He did not feel hatred, or even fear, at that moment all he could feel was sadness. But he did not realise the predicament that Estella was in.

A single tear – a moment's hesitation – an ominous incantation in a strange tongue – the sound and flash of a battle-wand.

Josh Beecham fell down onto the ground.

Mike's state of fear and shock was compounded by grief. He burst into tears and was led away, unable to even say a proper goodbye to his friend.

Kerantzky looked around at the dead bodies of many of his minions scattered all over the approaches to the farmhouse. He smiled grimly and then turned to his guard.

"Zrow zem in zer! (Pointing at the blazing barn). And kill zose cowardz in ze field. Oh, and leave zat bilge rat to rot where he iz. Do it! Now!"

The survivors hiding in the field then caught a lucky break. The ever inconsistent and erratic leader of the warlocks mused on the state of play, and let the corn-hugging cowards live on after all.

A little later, after the warlocks had carried out their cremation duties, Josh Beecham still lay motionless in the field, but then – he opened one eye, stared ahead for a second or two, looked around – and then opened the other. There was a loud whisper from behind the tractor shed.

"Oy! Basil Fawlty! Pack that in and let's get out of here!" It was Estella.

Josh crawled slowly along the ground until he reached the tractor shed. He half stood, and sidled around the back to where Estella was waiting for him. He took one look at her and said, "You could have killed me!"

"Nah! Although strictly speaking I probably should have done," said Estella. "I've managed to fool Kerantky up to now, but it was very risky. I banked on him not knowing that one of the common Death-spells sounds almost the same as the old Mayan spell for 'Just duff him up a bit and stop his heart for two minutes'. Risky though, the moment someone spots you've upped and

gone rather than your still lying out here being gnawed on by rats and pecked at by crows, then there'll be big trouble," said Estella.

Josh looked around at the scenes of carnage and chaos, lifted up his nose and sniffed the air, and then with a wry smile and a slightly bent head, looked at Estella. Both burst out laughing.

"Anyway, I thought I'd best come back and get you, least I could do."

"Thanks!" said Josh, but as he had a warped sense of humour he was actually amused. However, his face changed to that of thunder as he began to dwell on Estella's actions.

"Why did you make Mike go with them, Estella? Are you really on their side now?"

Estella gave a big sigh.

"No, of course not, Josh, but Professor Winch told me that Mike must stay as a hostage for now and to stop anyone who tried to interfere with his plans. That's why I had no option but to use the battle-wand against you."

"And that's why we had our blazing row last night," said a regretful Josh.

"Pardon?" said Estella.

"I don't often disagree with Professor Winch as strongly as I have done this time. When I heard his plans to use Mike, I just wouldn't have it. I stormed out of the meeting, shouting for volunteers as I left – and came to the rescue."

"Oh Josh, still as pig-headed as ever!"

"That would be OK to say if it was one of those occasions where I saw the error of my ways, but even now I still think I'm right. So I'm sorry, Estella, if being right is to be pig-headed, then I'm – er – a pig-head?" said Josh, and very softly at that, suddenly realising how poor his abstract grammar could be.

"Well now, Mr high and mighty Josh Beecham! Do you know you and your little posse nearly killed Mike and I? The house was falling down around us!"

"Oh, sorry about that. I'm afraid Blind Bob Dingle, Secretary of the Cornish wizards insisted oncoming along, said something about payback time or something."

"What is that supposed to mean? All Cornish men are rubbishy shots?"

"Oh, so you don't know him? He's an old, blind wizard who had his eyes burned out by Kerantzky many years ago. I put it to him, politely of course, that maybe he shouldn't come along, but he said it was no problem as he had a sixth sense which could guide him along and hone in on evil. He said it was better than having ordinary eyesight."

"And you believed him?"

"Yes, until he bumped into a lamp-post, two bridges and a pylon on the way over! That's why we were so badly delayed, otherwise we'd have been here hours ago. I even suggested to him that the rest of us would engage the enemy if he would keep dixie, trouble is, there was something else he hadn't told us."

"And what would that be, he suffers from a trigger finger?!" mocked

Estella.

"No. He's deaf. Turns out his hearing aid fell out after his first bump, he never aheard a word we said after that! It was Blind Bob who nearly destroyed the farmhouse."

Estella just gave a big sigh, thankful that it had not been worse.

"Well that's another big idea of mine gone up in smoke. What's next?" said Josh, glad to change the subject. Estella frowned.

"I'm sorry to say that I think I've been rumbled. Kerantzky has been rather suspicious of me lately anyway, and your still being alive and well is certainly not going to help matters. But what's more, Lieberman has told Zenith he thinks there is a spy in the camp, so Kerantzky has probably told Lieberman it could be me. It wouldn't surprise me if Lieberman is in my house, right now, waiting to kill me. That's one way of getting promotion."

"Hmmm – I see what you mean, you had best not go back there. Have you any friends around here we can trust?"

"One. Hillary Edmund. One thing, though, she's not from the magic community. She's totally and utterly trustworthy, I'm glad to say, but we still can't take chances. So, no magic, no talk of magic – nothing. OK?"

"You sound just like Creek!"

"What?!"

"Nothing. Funny though, that name, it's familiar to me . . . I wonder why?"

"She was a famous pot-holer, that could be it."

"What, really good at it or something?"

"Oh no, absolutely terrible! She's had to be rescued eight times, made the papers, the telly, everything!"

"Oh!" chortled Josh. "I think we'd best be going. Is it far?"

"No, no, just up the road. The thing is, we're not in the clear yet, we'll have to crawl out of sight until we reach the gate at the end, then we should be OK."

Josh and Estella crawled for thirty yards, carefully and quietly opened the gate, and were away. Ten minutes later they rang the doorbell of number thirty Walkells Road. There was no answer. They rang again. No answer.

"What now?" asked Josh.

"She must be out. No matter, I know where she keeps a spare key."

Estella moved her hand around the soil of a hanging basket dangling from the roof of the porch and eventually found a spare front door key. They let themselves in and Estella gestured for Josh to stop in the hallway while she walked on into the front room.

But no sooner had she walked through the lounge door than Estella screamed. Josh rushed in; there on the floor, quite dead, was Hillary Edmund. He put his arm round Estella, who managed to stifle her screams but still sobbed violently.

From over Estella's shoulder Josh spotted a small, bloodstained piece of paper in Hillary's left hand.

"Hold on, she's left a note."

Josh gently moved Estella away from him and led her to an armchair, and then went over to the lifeless body of Hillary Edmund. He crouched down, leaned across, and managed to delicately free the note which Hillary had written in her death throes and had held onto tightly until she had passed away.

Josh read the note, but not out loud:

'To my best friend, Estella.
I never told them anything. Not a thing.
Tell Professor Winch he was right.
Good is good no matter the persuasion.
Your friend forever.
Love – Hillary.'

"I think you had better read this, if you are up to it."

Estella wiped her tears away and took the note from Josh.

"So she knew! She knew all the time!" Estella once again wept remorselessly.

Josh knew that somehow, some way, Estella would have to pull herself together and grieve later for her loyal friend and not now. He put this to her and she understood. Again, she wiped her tears away.

"We'll have to ring for an ambulance and the police. If she was one of us I'd do things differently, but it's best for her if we do things the ordinary way."

"I'll do it," said Josh. "Er – it's 999 these days, I believe?"

Estella nodded but gave a quizzical look. She obviously did not know that Josh had great difficulty keeping up with the scientific and technological developments of the non-magic world. She was soon to realise, though.

Josh took one look at the tiny telephone without finger holes for dialling.

"Sorry, but maybe you had better do it after all."

Estella heard a noise in the near distance.

"Or maybe you should run back up to the farm and tell them yourself."

It was clear to them both that the noise from all that had gone on during the last few hours or so had finally alerted the nearest neighbours.

The nosy yet justifiably scared curtain twitchers had called the police and ambulance service themselves, as well as the fire brigade to put out the fire in the barn.

Estella and Josh could now hear the tell-tale sirens loud and clear. Estella called the authorities herself to state that they now had another incident to deal with in the Thornton area. She then went and sat down in silence opposite Josh.

After a few moments Estella asked her friend, "Shall we stay and give them some explanation? Or just go?"

Josh had been thinking. He had decided to bring in from the cold one of the WFW's most highly thought of spies, Estella Grant. She had done so much

for the cause of good and with very little help. Josh was also worried that as she had indeed been found out, Lieberman and his cohorts could be back any minute with the police, or even worse disguised as the police. He explained all this to Estella, who reluctantly agreed to get out of the current danger zone.

Josh activated his special wartime issue TMG which had even greater range and flexibility.

In an instant the two were in Blackpool, but not on top of the tower. Josh thought it wise not to have another stand up row with Professor Winch just yet, as he wanted to have a quiet chat with Estella.

They found themselves outside the Mirage Café, down one of the quieter side streets in Blackpool. They went in and each ordered coffee and sat at a table at the far end of the room.

After a few moments of awkwardly stirring their coffees and not looking at each other, Josh could not keep silent any longer.

"Estella, what happened to us? What really went on in your mind all those years ago? I've missed you from that day to this. What went wrong?"

Estella stopped stirring her coffee, but just stared into the cup. After a short while she lifted her head and gave Josh a sad smile.

"Josh, I think that after all these years you finally deserve the truth, but it may hurt you again. Are you sure you are ready for this?"

Josh meekly nodded as he wasn't really sure what was coming. Estella sighed.

"You were not right for me at the time, Josh. I was as badly messed up as you were, and I figured two messes don't make tidy – are you with me?"

Again, Josh just nodded. Estella continued.

"I went through in my mind again and again as to what I should do, but each time my head kept telling me, no, no, no."

"And what of your heart?" quietly asked Josh.

"My heart was always saying yes, Josh, always, but hearts are for Heaven, heads are for Earth. You had some deep rooted problems within you, constantly attacking the nice, lovely man that you really were. You were simply too much for me to take on. I had problems, too, which made me just as unreliable and at times just as disloyal to you . . . but from now on, let's be good friends, eh? Like I've always wanted us to be."

Josh gave a sad smile; he had no reply to any of this.

The museful wizard was also particularly thankful that in her eloquent account, Estella had left out many of the self-hewn rough edges of his past, which was for a time – their past.

Before either could say anything more, they were both disturbed by Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph.

"Josh, Miss Grant?"

"Yes, Professor?" replied Josh.

"Well done, Josh, I am sure we're both relieved it all came good in the end. And I'm sorry for your loss, Miss Grant, I'll do whatever I can to help. No

doubt you now know your friend knew more than she let on. One day in the near future we will talk more of Hillary. Oh, and just to show I'm not a chauvinist, well done to you, too! Ok, you two, I am sorry to have to disturb your coffee, but – er – any chance of putting in an appearance at this war we're having?"

"Yes, Professor," chuckled Estella, "we'll be there soon."

A yet again smiling Estella Grant and a bemused Josh Beecham wondering what it was exactly he had done well, reminisced a little more about times past before leaving to rejoin their friends and colleagues in the Top-Deck Restaurant.

43

A Plan with a Battle

(Back to the previous evening).

Professor Winch and the delegation from Hemlock Hall had left Mike with friends old and new.

After going up in the lift and walking along to the entrance of the Top-Deck, Professor Winch gestured for his troops to gather round by the door but not to enter the restaurant just yet.

"Can I have your attention please, everyone? Thank you. Now, I am sure that none of you have ever experienced being in this situation before, so please listen very carefully while I explain a few things to you all.

"As some of you know, the main room of the Top-Deck Restaurant exists as a Dual Annexe within a Parallel Annexe. Tonight it is going to be the venue for a meeting of two groups of people – namely: ourselves, and a delegation of our Krickenstaltz friends. However, due to the inherent vagiaries of the type of magic employed, both parties will be in different dimensions, and for the duration of the conference itself things will remain that way. This leads me to a very important pointer. As both groups will be in the same room despite not being able to see each other, this means that much care needs to be taken if this is going to work – so please, folks, no idle curiosity, or even a devil-may-care leap into the unknown. (Upon hearing this some of the gathering smiled, while others pulled faces due to feeling they were being treated like errant schoolchildren).

"So let's just keep this simple: Once we are all inside, please go straight to your seats and stay there: we have been allocated the left side of the restaurant, at least from our point of view, the folks from Krickenstaltz the right. Now as for the social gathering later on. there are of cour—"

"Excuse me, Headmaster," asked Ezekiel Creek, "Sorry for interrupting. I know we can't see the other side, but will we be able to hear them?"

Professor Winch smiled, but he also blushed – a little.

"Do you know, Ezekiel, that's a good question, I really don't know. On balance, I suspect not, but if we could, I think at best it would just be mixed up with the babble from our side, a bit like drop-shadowed rhubarb. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, the shindig afterwards. This will be held in one of the smaller rooms outside the Annexe parameters, which can be used freely without such limitations, although it will be a bit of a squeeze. But the downside here is we will definitely be seen by all and sundry – but I'm sure Jean Michelle has conjured up a good cover story for us all, at least I hope he has . . . Now any more questions before we go in?"

"Plenty, Headmaster," said Professor Cornstone. "How on earth is this

going to work? If we can't see them – nor them us – how do we all communicate?"

"I knew you would ask that, Edwin," smiled Professor Winch. "All of you know Jean Michelle, or know of him, correct?" Everyone nodded. "But who has heard of Bertie the Jukebox – anyone?" Most of the gathering shook their heads.

"I'll do my best to explain. Sometime back, Jean Michelle experimented in both Parallel and Dual Dimensioning. Although at the time both the Magic Council and the WFW frowned upon such independent enterprises, his staggering success has allowed us all to be here tonight, but as usual success comes with a price.

"During the early experiments, Jean Michelle attempted to adapt a powerful Magic-Fusion spell to try and prove he could combine two dimensions into the one space and time. The result was an almighty explosion which sent both Jean Michelle and his young assistant, one Bertie Crabb, flying out of the window and crashing right down through the roof of the Electronics and Music Department of a well-known High Street store—"

"Which one?" interjected Professor Cornstone.

"Can't remember," replied Professor Winch. He continued: " . . . As you probably know, such concentrations of magic energy and ordinary energy when combined can have catastrophic results. The whole floor lit up with a bright orange light and there were sparks and thunderbolts rip roaring around for hours.

"It turned out that Jean Michelle was relatively unscathed but Bertie had got the worst of it. His head had gone right into a jukebox, one leg had become stuck in the workings of an overhead projector with the other in the tower of a computer. One arm was wearing a short wave radio, and the other a micro-wave oven.

"After we had given both a good check-up, we were amazed to find that both Jean Michelle and Bertie, no doubt as a result of the accident, had acquired the ability to travel between dimensions at will, remaining visible in either, which is something we, well, most of us cannot do. This meant that despite the explosion, Jean Michelle had progressed significantly in what he was trying to do. He then concentrated on controlling, adapting and maximising such power until he had created the Dual Annexe within this restaurant, which complemented the existing Parallel Annexe of Blackpool, but there was more. . .

"Firstly, due to the transfer of the different energies while incarcerated among all of the gizmos, Bertie had been converted into a human home entertainment and business presentation system. If that wasn't incredible enough, after further investigations we found that Bertie had gone one better than Jean Michelle and had acquired the ability to be seen across the dimensions by both sides at the same time.

"The trouble is, although he's supposed to be a stable boy and general aide for the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment, he doesn't do a tap of work. The

others just feed him all day so they can listen to Elvis Presley records."

"Feed him, Headmaster? What for?" asked a cynical Professor Cornstone, who thought Professor Winch was really just joshing them all, maybe to kill time as perhaps the room was not yet ready. Quite by accident, the cynical professor was more or less correct on this occasion, although he was yet to realise that the time-burning yarn so adeptly spun by his leader, was indeed fact not ficton. A few moments earlier Professor Winch had put his hand to his left ear and his brows had become furrowed, but this was in concentration rather than anger or worry. It was actually an incoming message from Jean Michelle. Apparently there had been a slight hitch, and as a result it would be best if the Hemlock Hall delegation did not enter the restaurant just yet, but the proprietor promised that they would not be delayed long.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot to mention. He has to be fed before he can do what he does," finally replied Professor Winch.

"Why?"

"I don't know why, he just does."

"So each time he has a meal or a snack, he belts out rock 'n' roll and gives us the shipping forecast?"

"No, not at all! I said he has to be fed first – by others!" (At this point, the rest of the crew who had dutifully remained silent, started sniggering at this ridiculous banter).

"Why the difference? Why doesn't he turn into Chris Moyles when he's having his cornflakes?"

"How on earth should I know?!" retorted an exasperated Professor Winch.

"There must be some explanation, surely?" asked a mischievous Professor Cornstone, delighted to finally have his superior on the ropes.

As Professor Winch struggled to come up with a satisfactory answer, his good friend, Professor Ezekiel Creek came to the rescue.

"For goodness sake, Edwin, give it a rest! If the Headmaster says he doesn't know, then he doesn't know!" His voice softened as he turned to his friend and colleague. "One thing, though, Headmaster, how will Bertie help in bridging the dimensions? OK, he can zap between the two with tea and biscuits for both parties, but how will that help?"

"First of all, Jean Michelle will do the zapping, and it's muffins and cocoa. As for Bertie, he is more than he looks. He can, with a little modification here and there, project sounds and images across the two dimensions. He can't quite do it all on his own, of course—"

"Why not?" interjected Professor Cornstone.

"Shut up, Edwin," replied Professor Winch, " . . . but with the latest telemagickeraph which now has greatly improved dual dimension conferencing facilities, I think we will all be able to see and hear each other quite adequately."

"Which model is that one, Headmaster? Mark eight is it now?" enquired Professor Cornstone, at the same time as Professor Winch suddenly frowned

and again put his hand to his left ear.

"Nine," said Professor Winch at length, after seemingly nodding to no-one and lowering his left hand. " It came in a short while ago . . . now, if we're all ready . . . ?"

They went through the door and into the Top-Deck Restaurant and made their way over to the conference style seating on the left side of the room. As the individual seats had all been labelled with their names and as the place was in semi-darkness, eyes were strained and there was a little bumping and head knocking as they each tried to find their own seat, but soon all were settled.

After they had all dutifully sat there for about twenty minutes, Bertie the Jukebox appeared and climbed on to a rostrum, which unusually was to the rear of the room. After receiving instructions in his mind from his controllers, namely, the four senior members of the WFW, Bertie commenced shuffling over to dead centre of both the room and the platform. He then just stood stock-still, staring out over the heads of those who had turned round to see not only who this strange fellow was, but were also curious as to what he was up to.

While still standing deathly still as if auditioning to be an Iron Man of Crosby, both Bertie's eyes suddenly lit up, with two distinctly different lights shining out from each.

Two soft white lights beamed directly out and onto the wall at the front of the restaurant, creating a large rectangular off-white blank screen, a little like a cinema projector when turned on but before the film has commenced. The other lights, like wide-angled green laser beams, shone at downward angles from Bertie's eyes. However, to all those unlearned in this branch of magic, which was of course the case for the overwhelming majority of the entire gathering, something did not seem quite right.

Although those on the Hemlock Hall side, or at least those who had been interested enough to turn round, could see a green light shine down and illuminate a table and six chairs to the right (their right) of the rostrum, the corresponding light shining the other way just seemed to go nowhere, losing its oomph somewhere on the opposite and seemingly empty side of the restaurant. However, this was not the case at all, for on the Krickenstaltz side there was also a table and six chairs which were also illuminated by a magic beam, and the folks gathered there could also observe, if interested, a seemingly pointless projection fading to nothing on the Hemlock Hall side.

The attention of most of the assembly on both sides of the restaurant was soon back on the front wall. Now, instead of there being just a blank screen, there was a single projected image of one long table with twelve chairs. Quite a few gasps and even the odd round of applause went round the Top-Deck Restaurant. Of course, the real power of the unique magic in play was that it would allow all delegates to be able to focus solely on the projected single image of all twelve grandees, once they had all finally assembled on the rostrum.

There was one drawback though: such an effort had pretty much drained Bertie of his powers. This wasn't a serious problem and Bertie would be just fine, but unless someone could think of something and soon, then Professor Winch and the eleven other grandees would be left staring at a blank wall throughout the conference, as they would be at the wrong end of the room, but help was soon at hand. After hasty consultations between Professor Winch and Jean Michelle and his perfectly non-magic conferencing staff, two perfectly ordinary video cameras and projectors were set up, enabling both halves of the conference hoi-poloi to be filmed, and the pictures broadcast live onto the back wall, or perhaps walls. It was not going to be perfect, nor a complete picture for any one side, but it was something.

Professor Cornstone, casting a critical eye as only he can, noticed that there was a brand new telemagickeraph in place on each side of the magically combined rostrum, each with two extra spirally seashells on the top. He also noticed that they were not real seashells as they were with the original models, but were made of stainless steel.

"Tut! Tut! Magic?! It's getting more like ordinary science every day!" said the traditionalist Professor Cornstone. These were the only observations he could make for the moment. The pre-conference setting up and testing was over, Bertie's eyes were dulled and the screen went black.

The conference room was now filling up rapidly on both sides.

The Krickenstaltz delegation was a self-contained affair, with all its attendees both living and working at the WFW's European citadel.

The Hemlock Hall side, now packed out, had in truth been somewhat misnamed when taking into account the expected large assembly of wizards and witches from around the country, and even around the globe, many of whom had no connection to the school whatsoever. However, all of these were perfectly happy to be classed as part of the Hemlock Hall contingent.

One really odd thing was that on the left side of the room a man was sitting on his own, looking straight ahead and seemingly totally uninterested in his fellow attendees. His name was Jackson.

Professor Winch, after crossing the dimensions with consummate ease, was talking to Professor Ren Stannich and Jean Michelle.

" . . . We all get lucky sometimes, gentlemen. I knew years ago you had broken the rules, and I have to be honest, if I had caught you red-handed at the time it would have been prison, but things change. Your little enterprise has enabled us all to be brought together this evening, so no more will be said. But (he looked sternly at each man in turn, then smiled), I think it's time I wasn't here. See you both very shortly."

Professor Winch once more jumped dimensions. After watching him go, a relieved Jean Michelle rushed off to prepare the end of conference feast, while Ren Stannich wiped his glistening brow with his handkerchief and then waved to his mystified brother Ernst, who had diplomatically seated himself a few feet away from the other three.

Ernst nodded and signalled to Gregor, who was outside the main entrance

looking down on the merry throngs below. He came back in and they went together to their seats.

These were the only familiar faces from Krickenstaltz to attend the conference as all the children were doing their own thing, with Marina and Laszlo supposedly keeping a discreet watch over them. However, their side of the restaurant was now also full. Most of these were ancient wizards brought up from their highly secret den, deep below Krickenstaltz. These were the Ancient Council of the WFW. Strictly speaking they should all have been on the rostrum but space and presentation limitations had prevented this, so a nominal eight of their number had earlier gone to take their seats as representatives of the whole Council. Even so, two of these had had to sit on the Hemlock Hall side. What most of the conference did not know was that due to their not having Bertie's unique powers, the two had had to deliberately use imperfect magic. This was to enable them to be present on the rostrum at all, but in a non-solid form, a little similar to what Mike had experienced when he had made his unauthorised transmutation to Hemlock Hall, but with the added bonus of being visible to others.

Just like in cinemas, everyone settled down as they thought proceedings were about to get underway – they weren't.

After what seemed an eternity punctuated by numb backsides and a possible onset of deep vein thrombosis, things finally got started.

"Quiet please, everyone."

It was Jean Michelle, standing at the front of the Hemlock Hall delegation, illuminated like a star on the stage of the Palladium.

"If I could have your attention, please. Bertie is not quite ready and unlike him I can't be seen by both sides at the same time, so once I have finished saying what I have to say to you, I have to go and say it all again to our Krickenstaltz friends, so please, show a little patience. There will be muffins and cocoa available at the interval. This is served in your own sides only, please remember that. However, the feast later on will be in a far smaller room which is within the Parallel Annexe, so we can all of us meet up then – but please remember that to do this, we will be – as far as our non-magic friends are concerned, the Blackpool Branch of the Magic Circle holding our AGM." Jean Michelle padded out other bits and pieces of useless banter and then departed.

After about five minutes the room went pitch black and the screen lit up once more. This time the image shown was of a majestic King Arthur. With one foot on an old tree stump, the famed leader of the Knights of the Round Table held aloft in his right hand the magical sword, Excalibur. In his left was the Magic Flag of the British Isles, which he held high and proud and which gently fluttered in the breeze.

A voice boomed out:

"Please stand for the '*Magic Anthem of the Magical British Isles!*'"

This is an anthem that has been sung by magic folk since King Arthur's time. The original version also contained references to Merlin, but after

eventually becoming clear that Merlin had betrayed his king, the anthem was modified to honour Arthur alone.

The entire gathering all stood, hands on their hearts, and sang out with great pride and passion. (This has a somewhat similar tune to the American National Anthem).

'From the Highlands and Glens, through the Heartlands and Fens,
O'er Erin the Green, to the Land of my Fathers.

May we take heart from you, valiant Arthur the True,
and when honour is done, may we join your Round Table.

As we fight the good fight, as we light the good light,
as we sow the green fields, growing your truth and love.

May your mercy never leave us, may your courage always lead us.
To our grave on from our cot, may we reach our Camelot!'

As usually follows whenever this stirring anthem is sung, there were tears as well as whoops and cheers. The ultra emotional Josh wiped his eyes and clapped loudest and longest.

The image of King Arthur slowly faded to be replaced by twelve very old men, sitting stony-faced behind a wooden table.

On the Hemlock Hall side, the sixth one in was Professor Winch; seemingly next to him was Professor Ren Stannich, but of course, in reality he was seated on the Krickenstaltz side.

Professor Winch coughed, ready to speak down the telemagickeraph. At first he kept a sombre face as he gravely panned the room. He stopped, stared straight ahead – and broke out into animated jest.

"Good evening, Blackpool! All right?!"

Both sides of the restaurant laughed out loud, even Ren and the other stodgy old wizards gave a quick chuckle and stroked their long straggly beards.

"I've always wanted to do that!" Professor Winch looked around, smiling, and waited until order had been restored. "Thank you. And of course, thank you everyone for coming and at such short notice, it is indeed appreciated. Regarding the exact reasons as to why we have all assembled here this evening, as much as I would like to say it's so we can all enjoy some tea and cake and nip next door to see the '*Cannon and Ball Show*', sadly, I cannot.

"Now, as some of you at least are only too aware, we have received very grave intelligence of imminent hostile action by the evil Professor Zenith and The League of Mordred . . . We will of course discuss how we are to deal with this immediate emergency, but I am sorry to say – it gets worse. . .

"Zenith and his sinister brethren have also formed an evil alliance with the Warlocks of Bucharest, the Wolf-Whales of Schnarkenfeld, and the cannibal-

elves, also of that locale. Sadly, there is the added danger and a terrible danger it is, too, of our enemies combining the necessary components in the one place and at the one time, for the purpose of releasing the dreaded Chaotagens. . ."

Professor Winch paused at this point, as he knew many would need at least a moment to let this dreadful possibility sink in.

The professor waited for the inevitable gasps and mutterings:

'No, surely not!'
'How can this be?!'
'How did it come to this?'

"However, ladies and gentlemen," continued the professor after relative calm had returned, "we have a chance – a slim chance – but a chance. . . "

Professor Cornstone leaned rudely past Daphne and said to Professor Creek, "Do you think there's a chance, we have a chance, by any chance?" Ezekiel did not make a verbal reply and instead just grimaced. "Suit yourself," said Professor Cornstone.

" . . . I know that some of you may think the following is rather extreme, but I believe it is necessary, dangerous, yes – but necessary. Young Michael Miller, a Hemlock Hall student and indeed a very brave young man, may yet save the day.

"Part of the plan is to let our enemies have young Michael as a hostage. Although I know that—"

"NO NO NO! I cannot allow this, Professor — I *WILL NOT ALLOW IT!*" It was an enraged Josh, standing up from his seat and shouting at the projected image of Professor Winch. He had been told beforehand that Mike was going to be used as one of the Professor's pawns (or prawns) in the game. Josh had protested but eventually did see that it made common sense, but hearing it afresh had made him change his mind again and this time there was no going back.

The others turned to look at their highly infuriated colleague, and at the same time the Krickenstaltz company could look at a little inset on their screen of Josh making his protest. This was courtesy of one of Bertie's extra features, a little white light emanating from his nose, honing in on conference delegates. On the Krickenstaltz side, Ernst smiled and leaned across to Gregor and whispered, "I hope there's no-one sitting behind Bertie who wants to say something."

The adolescent thirty and forty somethings sniggered away until told to shut it by the one-hundred and eighty-one year old Engelbert Osbaldeston, the Temporal Time Continuum Supervisor from Krickenstaltz.

Josh continued: "With all due respect, Professor, the boy is only fifteen! And what if it fails?! What if Mike ends up like any of the countless others who have lost their lives daring to stand up to Professor Zenith?! What then?!"

"Josh, I am truly dreadfully sorry, I thought we had been through all this. As much as I deeply regret using Michael in this way, there is no-one else. I am sorry but I can see no other way."

"There is someone else, as well you know! Where's that bumbler, Pendragon?! He's far closer to Arthur in the Line of Pendragon than Mike is! Get him to do your dirty work! If you won't find him and tell him — I will!"

While the other eleven old men despairingly held their heads in their hands, Professor Winch just gave a wry smile. "Not a bad idea at that," he replied. "Aloysius, would you be so kind as to join us on the rostrum. If you stand in front of the table, I'm sure Bertie will pick you up."

To gasps of astonishment, even from the still standing Josh Beecham, Professor Aloysius Pendragon, more recently known as the man called Jackson and more pertinently, a member of The League of Mordred, unwrapped his arctic survival gear from his over-heated self and walked to the back of the room to join Professor Winch – who gestured to his friend to prepare to speak.

"Please, Aloysius, if you would be so kind. Tell everyone here what you have been doing and why you cannot go in Mike's place." Professor Winch was being a tad over-dramatic here, as he already knew his friend and colleague was going to address the conference. This was not just to provide a brief summary of his recent wanderings, but to pass on the details of some highly disturbing and very recent developments.

Aloysius coughed to clear his throat and spoke down the telemagickeraph.

"My friends, since the last time you saw me I have been working undercover, but as you can see it's too hot in here so I've took them off!"

Laughter once more rippled through the conference.

"OK, folks, settle down, that's it . . . we'd best get serious. Now then, after Professor Winch and I had realised the significance of the theft of the Book of Chaotagens, I knew I had to infiltrate The League of Mordred, while at the same time convince friends of ours in Romania that they had to join the battle against our enemies, and just as importantly, set a magic defence shield around the Kingdom of Grezjgenschtad. This is also partly to do with why I cannot go in Michael Miller's place, but more of that later. I first have to tell you that you are all in imminent danger here tonight. . . "

At this, there were yet again gasps of disbelief around the restaurant.

" . . . However, as it so often is in magic life, the only way of dealing with danger is to face it head-on. Tonight – in less than twenty minutes – we will face a three-pronged attack by The League of Mordred, the Cannibal-Elves of Schnarkenfeld, and of course, the dreaded Wolf-Whales . . . but we are not totally defenceless. Professor Winch and I have already mobilised four Battalions of the WSS who are already in place.

"I now have to ask the following people if they would take part in a very risky gamble as part of our plans to fight back and banish such evil from our shores."

Professor Pendragon looked directly into the light to ensure his every word

and every gesture was heard and perceived correctly.

"Would Professors Cornstone, Creek and Stannich the elder, as well as Mr Mainbrace, Alderman Fenmarsh, Miss Llefevre, Mr Beecham, and, of course (turning to Professor Winch) – you and I, Gabriel, please congregate on the water's edge by the North Pier at ten minutes to ten. This is a very strange request, I know, but it may save countless lives later on. One more thing, Mr Beecham, I promise you that if we are all still here later, we will discuss Mike's safety, but for now we must concentrate on the evil racing its way to us as we speak.

"Would those mentioned please make your way. The rest of you, consider this a recess. If you have friends on the other side, so to speak, make your way out of the restaurant and into the room next door, where you can mingle freely. Good!"

Just like when there's an interval at the cinema, the lights went up and everyone rubbed their eyes. However, there was a solemnity to the proceedings as the majority of the delegates watched in awe as their named comrades went to meet their destiny, and maybe their deaths.

As the named personages left the tower and walked out onto the promenade, they were surprised by what they saw. The beach had been closed off either side of the North Pier leaving just limited access from the promenade. This facilitated the illusion of it being part of the set-up of a special outdoors event, whichh ironically would help keep spectators to a minimum. None at all would have been preferable, but as the beach was not the exclusive domain of the magic community this was not possible.

The partitions also doubled up as huge billboards. These proclaimed:

'TONIGHT AT 10PM!
EUROPEAN MARINE MAGIC SHOW!
SEE THE MAGIC OF THE DEEP!'

This had been put together by a little known Magic Council department, The Deception Squad.

The immediate area was policed by the Police, but they were not the real police, they were the WSS in disguise. Professor Pendragon gathered the chosen few around him on the promenade.

"Listen, everyone. This is probably the strangest thing all of you – or I – for that matter, have ever been asked to do, but please trust me . . . In my capacity as one of The League of Mordred, I promised that a delegation from both the Magic Council and the WFW would be here, supposedly to negotiate surrender, but in the enemy's supposed reality, to be lambs to the slaughter. However, do not be too dispirited, if all goes well for us, you will be safe. Just stand by the water's edge and wait, and that's it."

"Just wait? Wait for what?" asked Professor Cornstone.

"Just wait and see," replied the economic Professor Pendragon.

"I give up," said Professor Cornstone, giving up.

"Let's go,"

Following Professor Pendragon, they all went down a little flight of steps and made their way over the sand, and after a couple of minutes were all at the water's edge, waiting.

Out of sight further along the beach, were a large group of men, well covered up from both the cold and to avoid being recognised.

They were standing, huddled against the sea wall. Their leader, the man called Johann Hentz, addressed the others.

"Look at them! They've fallen for it! And look how they protect their non-magic friends! European Magic show?! Ha! We'll give them magic!"

"Just you make ze zertin ziss goes vell, or my mazter vill not be 'appy!"

This was from a warlock sent by Kerantzky to liaise with their allies.

"Your master will be eternally grateful after we've seen this pathetic bunch off, so stop worrying."

The warlock sneered and lit a cigarette.

"And you can put that out!" demanded Hentz. "We're supposed to be in hiding!"

"Garaq kerrushenzeker!" retorted the warlock, who threw his cigarette to the ground and crushed it with his foot, or thought he had.

"Oo ow!" said Billington.

"Zecrudzengochz stoaten-ferz!" (Lowly weasel) said the warlock.

"You carry on, me old mucker," said Billington.

The banter came to an abrupt halt as a voice boomed all around the North Pier.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! This is Chas Crummy of Fylde Promotions! Welcome to our jamboree of marine magic and fun! Never before have you seen what we have for you tonight! Never will you see it again! So you lucky people, please look to the sea and be amazed at the spectacle our illusionists and their merry band of helpers have conjured up for you tonight!'

The hundreds of fun seekers here mainly for the illuminations, looked out to sea, so too did the cream of The WFW and the Magic Council, including Alderman Beauregard Fenmarsh, whose nickname was *'The High Flier'*. Although he was the youngest Alderman ever and second in seniority only to the Lord Mayor himself, his nickname had been inspired by something entirely different. He had had rather too much to drink at a party one night, and while on his way home by broomstick had flown so high that he suffered oxygen failure, and was even registered as a UFO by the crew of the Space Shuttle.

Hentz looked at his watch. "This is it, gentlemen, victory will soon be ours. Battle-wands to the ready, mount your broomsticks. Now!"

The League of Mordred scrambled into the air on their broomsticks, just as the whole of the Irish Sea seemed to turn into one huge tidal wave. There

was an almighty roar which apparently could be heard in the Isle of Man.

Those gathered on the beach beyond the partitions, as well as the prom' side spectators, and even The League of Mordred hovering on their broomsticks, gasped with astonishment and fear at the sight that beheld them.

Thirty wolf-whales rose forty feet out of the water, roared at supersonic sound levels, parted the waves and raced toward the shore. The unwitting general public shouted, cheered, clapped and hollered.

Hentz shouted, "Dive! Dive! Dive!", and the League made their murderous approach towards Professor Winch and his friends.

Immediately, wave after wave of 'policemen' took to their flying police cars, better known as broomsticks. The cheers from the crowd were deafening.

The WSS headed off The League of Mordred, expertly firing their battle-wands and picking them off one by one, while at the same time avoiding being hit themselves.

Seven of the League were no more, but the lone warlock then showed his superior skills, twisting and loop de looping, while at the same time managing to fire death-bolts at the WSS.

Three of them fell from the sky to their deaths, to the dismay of our chosen few, but to the innocent delight of young Billy Wicks, who clapped and squealed as he was held up and sat on a barrier by his smiling mother, Milly.

The spectators were totally mesmerised at such a realistic show.

The Press were there in force, and after the first few minutes of the spectacle, began frantically writing their copy to rush to their editors. One of them even decided on '*Goodbye Mr Blackpool!*', as the banner headline. This was to indicate an '*Out with the old*' mentality, in reference to the style and quality of entertainment in the town. Mr Blackpool was one of the world's greatest exponents of the Wurlitzer organ which he had played every night of every summer season for almost thirty-five years at the Blackpool Tower Ballroom, and he and his huge organ became synonymous with the famed Lancashire resort town.

The demise of three of the WSS gave renewed spirit to The League of Mordred. They regrouped and split into a half-defending, half-attacking force. They shielded and deflected the relentless onslaught of the WSS, while managing to pick off five more of their number. Despite suffering considerable losses themselves, they were getting nearer and nearer to their main targets, who could do nothing but watch in dread.

At the same time, the wolf-whales finally cleared the water, still roaring and howling unmercifully.

The WSS lost three more men, two at the hands of the lone warlock who had expertly spiralled in between them scoring direct hits, and the third had been knocked off his broomstick through colliding with a dead comrade. All three had plummeted to the ground.

But there was something wrong, as far as the League were concerned at

least. There were no cannibal-elves; no-one to take up the opposite flank. This confused them but only momentarily as they still had the upper hand – or did they?

The wolf-whales reached Professor Winch and his friends. Professor Creek sheltered Daphne under his arms while the rest just stood there, heads bowed, expecting the worst – the worst never came.

The wolf-whales raced past all those at the water's edge, raised their heads to the sky, and began picking out The League of Mordred – sweeping them clean off their broomsticks and ravaging them in their huge mouths with their enormous razor sharp teeth. Some were swallowed after being torn to shreds, others were flung down onto the shore or into the sea. The rest escaped with injuries ranging from minor cuts to huge gashes across their faces, chests, backs and legs. These fled back the way they had come, including Hentz, who had ordered a tactical retreat but had only given the order to himself.

At this point there was a mixed reaction from the crowd. Many pensioners decided to go and have their fish and chips early. "Disgusting! Whatever happened to that nice man, Paul Daniels?" asked one old dear. "Not a lot!" replied her husband. He actually meant this in tribute, as he had been a great fan of the late, great stage magician, uttering his daft catchphrase whenever he could.

Back to the battle in the sky. The lone warlock viewed with dismay the unexpected rout. He also realised that at that moment he was a little away from the action and was going unnoticed. He had an element of surprise and he was going to use it. Upon seeing the good folks below standing around in bewilderment, he geared himself up for a dive bombing attack.

Professor Cornstone just happened to look up from the shoreline and saw that the warlock had a clear run on their little gathering.

"Oh no you don't, laddie!" He ran over to the body of one of his WSS defenders. "I'm sorry, lad, you were very brave. It's my turn now." He gently but quickly folded the young man's arms across his chest and picked up his broomstick and battle-wand.

Professor Cornstone was now in the air, racing to meet a rapidly oncoming warlock.

The initial airborne squaring up saw both men trying to call each other's bluff, but neither man was fooled in the least by the other.

The crowd were full of 'oohs' and 'aahs' as they witnessed such a sky-borne spectacle.

The warlock raised his battle-wand; Professor Cornstone raised his. ('Ooh!' went the crowd). When the two were only a second away from each other, Professor Cornstone dived but then just as quickly climbed again while at the same time turning in a highly unconventional loop de loop. ('Aah!' went the crowd). He rose above the warlock and fired his battle-wand down at him, but the warlock showed why he was sent by Kerantzky.

With phenomenal speed he evaded the death-bolt. He then stopped dead in

the air and fired his battle-wand straight at Professor Cornstone's chest – or he thought he had. The quick thinking professor had seen this manoeuvre in battle before and was ready.

On seeing the warlock stop, Professor Cornstone had turned upside down and had waited for him to fire and miss, and from his upside down position had fired off eleven death-bolts up at the warlock.

But the professor soon realised things were not going to be that easy. The warlock had led Professor Cornstone into a trap, and he too had guessed his opponent's next move. Not only did the warlock shoot off and out of the way of the airborne broadside, but whooshed down and round in a semi-circle and immediately raced back towards the professor, repeatedly firing his battle-wand after completing the half-turn.

Professor Cornstone, although evading most of the death-bolts with incredible dexterity, couldn't totally evade them all. Three death-bolts glanced off his shoulder. Luckily for Professor Cornstone, the term death-bolt can often seem misnomerous, as there has to be direct or near-direct contact with a major organ or artery before they can kill; but he was in a tight spot nonetheless. "Ah, well, it's been a grand old life," he said philosophically to himself. In a split-second he had turned his broomstick to face the oncoming warlock and just rocketed straight toward him.

The warlock, although brave, was not expecting this, and before he could formulate a worthwhile counter-move, simply backed out of the way.

The professor saw his split-second advantage and fired off a tremendous volley of death-bolts as he passed within inches of his stunned adversary. However, despite these seeming to be direct hits, his evil opponent had not been killed. The warlocks are famed for their defensive tunics and this had given the warlock some protection. However, his tunic was finally pierced by three more death-bolts from Professor Cornstone's battle-wand on a return run at his opponent. The warlock took two hits to the shoulder and a direct hit to his chest, but still he lived on, courtesy of his magically-toughened tunic, as sorry looking as it now was.

But the warlock, with a globule of blood from Professor Cornstone's injured shoulder splattering him in the face to add insult to injury, knew he had been beaten and so duly retreated. If that wasn't bad enough, he was savagely mauled by Zoopnah, leader of the Wolf-Whales, while fleeing southwards.

Although it was at a terrible cost to the WSS, the night was saved – just as Professor Pendragon promised it would be.

A WSS medic waited for Professor Cornstone to land and then dashed across to check him over. He gently moved his injured shoulder back and forth, and then cleaned the blood away. "Ow-ow-ow!"

"Och, ye'll live, laddie, just get some elastoplast off the bozos. . ."

Professor Cornstone just humphed as the medic walked off to rejoin his unit. "Ow!" he said again, after dabbing his shoulder, but the medic was right. The injuries, although very sore and bloody, were quite superficial, and, at least in the medic's opinion, was not worth the time or cost in

indulging in any sort of remedy of magic origins. Once the bleeding had stopped and scabs had formed, then the professor would be just fine.

The Deception Squad once again took over, screening off the area to avoid anyone learning the truth – especially the grisly truth that there had been real death in the skies.

But preceding this had been another fake announcement declaring that the show had come to an end.

'Show's over, folks! Move over the two Davids – Copperfield and Blaine of course! That's what I say! Wasn't that just great – ladies and gentlemen?! So realistic! And my oh my! What about those wolf-whales! I'll never swim in the sea again! Well, folks, until next time, this is Chas Crummy of Fylde Promotions, saying — Goodnight Everybody!'

There was a final round of applause from the crowd – those who had remained that is, before they slowly made their way to the more usual forms of entertainment that can be found on a night out in Blackpool.

Zoopnah roared out instructions to his fellow wolf-whales and they departed below the waves. He swam back into the Irish Sea, turned, and kept his head raised above the water in readiness to speak to those he had supposedly come to help kill. He waited patiently while everyone on shore surveyed the chaos.

Daphne was crying into Professor Winch's shoulder while Professor Pendragon stood by. He spoke gently to her. "My dear Daphne, I know it's a terrible price to pay, but they gave their lives gladly as you also were prepared to do only moments ago."

Daphne tried to speak but was just too choked. Professor Pendragon gave her a sad smile and patted her on the arm. Then he, along with the rest of the gathering, ran to Professor Cornstone to thank him for his bravery and quick thinking, and to see if he was OK. But – hero or not, he was still the grump they knew him to be and he duly told them all to stop fussing.

Professor Pendragon then addressed the shocked and saddened and yet relieved gathering, all still at the water's edge.

"Please, everybody, gather around for a moment. Please everyone – this is important . . . that's it." Professor Pendragon was waiting to explain exactly what they had just witnessed.

"It may come as a surprise to you all to hear this, but the truth is, the Wolf-Whales of Schnarkenfeld were never, ever our enemies. . ."

"What?!" said an astounded Josh Beecham. "That's not what it seemed like to me!"

"Believe me, they were not our enemy. The wolf-whales that you fought, Josh, were a rogue outfit. They lived their lives as outcasts from their own worldwide brotherhood, but the wolf-whales here are allies of our community."

"But I fought their leader, Zoopnah, that big hulking mammal over there in

the water!"

As expected with such huge ears, this did not go unheard by Zoopnah. With a big booming voice, Zoopnah interjected and managed in broken English to explain.

"You who are known as Beechy Bonce did not fight against me – you fought with my brother. He was nothing but sea-brigand – a murderer of own kind, as well as land people."

"But you are Zoopnah! I fought against you! You nearly killed me!"

"You do not understand, Beechy Bonce. To wolf-whales, Zoopnah means leader! My real name no consequence, but it not Zoopnah, that means leader. My brother was leader of evil outcasts. He proclaimed himself Zoopnah, offending wolf-whales everywhere. You fight my brother – not me. But do not be sorry, Beechy Bonce, world better off without sea-brigand."

Professor Cornstone, while using his right hand to cover his left shoulder, had a question.

"Er – before you go, Mr Zoopnah, what happened to the cannibal-elves?"

"Men-eaters are my enemy just as they are your enemy. Him (meaning Professor Pendragon), and me, trick men-eaters. Now, I must go! Rejoin my brothers."

"Yes, but what has happened to them?" persisted Professor Cornstone.

"My brothers very hungry. When no big fish, men suffice! But only bad men! Farewell!"

"Very glad to hear it!" replied Professor Cornstone.

With tsunamic proportions, the waters once again rose causing a thundery surf as Zoopnah disappeared under the waves, but he immediately resurfaced and let out a blood-curdling scream.

"Don't worry, everyone, he's just saying goodbye," said Professor Pendragon.

"Burping, more like," said Professor Cornstone. Zoopnah was gone.

"Bye-bye, Mr No Consequence! Stupid name, that. And don't call me Beechy Bonce!" shouted Josh, once he was certain that Zoopnah was underwater and unable to hear him.

Professor Winch smiled and gestured to his friend. "Can I have my conference back now?"

His friend chuckled, put his arm around his shoulder and they walked back up to the promenade. "Be my guest. Oh, how silly we are, I'm already your guest really, aren't I . . . ?"

The two chewed the fat while leading the much relieved chosen few back to the restaurant. At the same time, Professor Cornstone was asking his colleagues if they knew 'who or what are 'bozos'?'

To the sheer delight of everyone still in the Top-Deck, the heroes returned and retook their places. Jean Michelle realised a need for a slight change in plans and served the refreshments during the conference.

The lights went down and everyone was back on the rostrum, including Professor Pendragon who was the first to speak.

"As you can see, we're still here!" He waited for the inevitable whoops and cheers to die down. "Before I hand you back to Professor Winch and the rest of the grandees, there is a little unfinished business from earlier on. As some of you know, young Michael Miller and I are both of the House of Pendragon. As far as is known, we are the only two Pendragons that have the unfortunate and unwanted power to release the Chaotagens.

"As odd as it may seem, we believe it is best to let our enemies believe they can unite all three parts of the puzzle, so to speak. It is really a delaying tactic on our part as we desperately need to rearm ourselves, as we know that our enemies will not cease to be a threat until they are defeated in open battle. This is not of our choosing, or design, or will, it is simply the truth, which means that it is of paramount importance to delay them somehow until we are ready. We feel that the best delaying tactic we have at our disposal, is – Mike.

"While we wait for the Magic Army to be reconstituted, we propose to let our enemies have two parts of the three part puzzle at any one time. This means they will always be concentrating their efforts on recovering the missing piece, while we, hopefully, will be rapidly strengthening our position. Are there any questions at this point? Yes, Mr Beecham? What a surprise!"

"Why Mike? Why not you? I just can't see why you can't go and do whatever it is you've got in store for Mike."

"Believe me, Mr Beecham, all this has been discussed and argued and the same all over again for many, many hours. Unfortunately I cannot be Zenith's or anyone else's hostage, because very shortly I have to go back to Romania to liaise with our allies about their part in all this."

"Why can't someone else go and do that?"

"Because, Beechy Bonce – er – Mr Beecham, no-one else speaks Psychimpalese, and there is no-one else free or able to set the spells for a much needed defence shield."

"What? Psychimpalese?! Do you mean Impalese, as in Vlad the Impala?"

"Yes, Mr Beecham, Vlad the Impala. So now do you see?"

"No, I do not! I can't see how Vlad the Impala's involvement should take priority over the protection of a fifteen year old boy! Fifteen! A boy!" Josh just stood and looked with fury, first at Professor Pendragon and then Professor Winch. Both had pained expressions on their faces.

Professor Pendragon turned to Professor Winch. He didn't have to say anything, his face let Professor Winch know the question. "Is Josh Beecham right? Are we asking too much?"

After a short pause, Professor Winch gave a very faint shake of his head and whispered to his colleague.

"We must proceed, Aloysius, but it's best if you retire from the rostrum. Josh is really angry with me, you just happen to be in his line of fire."

As a sad Aloysius left the rostrum, Professor Winch walked round and stood in front of the table, deliberately allowing Josh Beecham to fully vent his fury on his wrinkled brow, his worried countenance, or at least on the magi-

cinematic version of himself.

"Josh, I'm very sorry, but the decision is final. Shout and yell at me if you wish, but it is done. I suggest we have another break and then Ren will take the—"

"Help! Zumvon 'elp! It iz Mike! Mike 'az gone! Taken by ze mad profezzor!"

What Ren was about to take would have to be revealed a little later, as proceedings had been disrupted and rather loudly at that, by Marina, Laszlo, and all the children who had run in to tell everyone of Mike's kidnapping.

Although the children were of course upset, as were Ellen and Laszlo, they were far from being in the panic-ridden state that Marina now found herself in – but swift action would be needed to ensure this remained the case.

"Qvickly! 'Elp! 'Elp! Zumbody do zumzing! Mike 'az gone! 'ELP! PLEEZE 'ELP!"

The professor, after demanding no-one else in the room move from their seats, left the rostrum and guided the worried troop back outside; this was to prevent their state of panic worsening due to the dual-dimensioning magic in play. He quickly surveyed them all, but then concentrated his efforts on coaxing Marina back to a calmer state of mind.

Marina had become so badly worked up that Professor Winch knew of only one thing which would help – brandy. After it had taken an unusually large amount of brandy to set her right, a hiccupping Marina (and Laszlo), were taken to one side and were told by Professor Winch that Mike's kidnapping was not exactly a surprise. As for the children, they were expediently informed that they had to go back a little earlier than planned.

Very soon after, there were tearful goodbyes between the children of Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz; first and foremost because they were all worried yet again for their good friend Mike, but also because none knew when they would all see each other again.

The conference was yet again restarted with Professor Winch once again at the helm.

"Attention please, everyone, thank you, settle down again if you would, please. Thank you. Although it was to have been my good friend, Ren Stannich, to have spoken to you all next about how we are to reconstitute the Magic Army, this will be a little later than planned, as I feel it necessary to discuss another very urgent but nevertheless related matter, and then if we find time, continue the debate concerning Michael Miller."

"Too right we are!" shouted Josh.

"Bang on cue, Mr Beecham. I could set my watch by you, if I needed one," said Professor Winch with a sigh.

Josh knew that to be called Mr Beecham meant that Professor Winch had withdrawn his preferential treatment toward him, at least temporarily.

"As Aloysius told you all earlier, we are playing a game with the enemy, as we do not intend to let them get in the position to release the Chaotagens. At the moment, we are currently trying to drive the warlocks back out to Romania. Ironically, that's where they want to go because it's their home,

and because their evil ally Professor Zenith is also there.

"So, what say you all we pack their bags for them – especially the bag holding the Chaotagen Wand?"

There was a round of 'hear hears!', foot stomping and applause, but not from a stony-faced Josh Beecham. Nor it has to be said from around thirty other grimacing delegates.

"And what say you, we allow Zenith back into Britain – with the Book of Chaotagens, of course – at exactly the same time?!"

More cheers, more foot stomping and even more grimacing from the same thirty or so dissenters followed this proposal.

"I think we've carried that one, just!" proclaimed Professor Winch, acknowledging the small but important dissent. "OK, folks, a bit of order please, a little fun is OK, but don't forget the reasons why we are here . . . Once Zenith is back here – we must keep him here. The stand to finish his evil influence must take place on these shores. The Magic Army has to be made ready and made ready soon, although their ultimate deployment is unclear at the moment. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Professor Ren Stannich, Director of the Krickenstaltz Academy, and soon to retake up his old position of Overall Commander of the Eastern Army."

There was a polite round of applause as Ren tried to address the conference.

"'Ere! 'E's in charge ov the owveralls!" said one cockney wag, Lionel Chugg, a wizard from Bermondsey.

"Very funny. I 'az never 'eard zat one before," said Ren Stannich, tiring of his own joke.

"First ov all, I know zat my English iz not ver—"

"WHO'S WITH ME?"

It was Josh, once again shouting and disrupting proceedings, spurred on by the perceived filibustering and seemingly being marginalised by his leader and the other grandees with regard to the issue of Mike Miller's captivity.

"Josh, please, not again!" said Professor Winch, forgetting he had withdrawn his sympathies.

Ren Stannich's face was like thunder. He was going to have a difficult enough job as it was speaking in poor English to a large crowd, and this interruption had unnerved him.

But Josh carried on unabashed.

"I'm going to get Mike and bring him to safety. Who's with me?!"

The rabble rouser Josh Beecham received a solid promise from a number of dissenting delegates that they would go with him and help rescue Mike. They stormed out of the door, only for Josh to return a few moments later.

"Er – where did you say the warlocks had made camp?" asked Josh, peering round the door.

"Seldon's Farm, Thornton," replied a surprisingly helpful Professor Winch.

"Thanks," said Josh and left.

Professor Winch and the rest of the grandees just sat there wondering

what they were to do next. Eventually, Ren Stannich restarted proceedings. He was very nervous and so decided to just get things over with as quickly as possible.

"Listen, everyvon. Vot I 'az to tell you, I can do zo qvite qvickly. Ze nitty gritty iz not zat important. Zo, ze Magick Army: bazickly, my gud friends from ze WFW Council, which obviuzly includez Profezzor Vinch – 'az agreed to let us use ze Time Cryztals ov Glaztonberry. Zese vill 'elp uz train up ze army very very qvickly, wizout zem it vud take a lot longer, per'apz too long and per'apz too late — zey are zat vital. Az I say, I cud explain many zingz, but it iz not necezerry. Zo, I believe such a motion needz to be voted on. Do I 'az your support?"

Discounting the detractors who had departed, both sides of the restaurant gave a hundred per cent support for Ren Stannich's proposal. Whether they were really persuaded by his impassioned argument, whether they just couldn't understand him, or whether they were more interested in the buffet afterwards was not certain, but it wasn't chow time yet.

As the vote was recorded by Alderman Fenmarsh, an ex officio member due to his Magic Council status, Professor Winch held his hand to his left ear and strained to listen. After a few moments he sat back, sighed, and gave a big smile. He patiently waited while the proceedings for the count were completed. He then spoke down the telemagickeraph.

"Ladies and gentlemen – as we speak – Professor Zenith and The League of Mordred are being forced out of Romania. Vlad the Impala, for reasons I don't yet fully understand, has not waited to be persuaded and has called his troops into battle. Despite my earlier misgivings, let us hope that Josh Beecham and his fellow – er – rabble-rousers, force the warlocks to make for home even earlier than they had originally planned."

The 'hear hears!', foot stomping and cheering returned. Professor Winch knew it was no use trotting out his prepared closing speech. He simply thanked everyone and asked them to go next door for the buffet.

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Odds and Ends, Foes and Friends

UPON VACATING the Top-Deck Restaurant and transferring to the smaller function room next door, the delegates gathered in the centre of the rather over-packed room, apart from Professor Cornstone who stood apart from the crowd. He readied himself to lead a tribute to those who had died. Although he was not the most senior person in the room in terms of authority he was the most apt to perform this solemn duty. This was due to his extensive experience in the various armed forces and secret services of the magic community.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Let us remember and honour the eleven brave men of the Wizard Secret Service who died this evening. They died defending not only some of us – but all of us – not only here in this room – but everywhere. They died in our defence, fighting this terrible evil that has invaded our shores. But while we have men with such stout hearts and such a burning desire for justice, we will never, ever, be slaves to such evil. So let us bow our heads in silence as we say our own private farewells, and show our own eternal gratitude for each and every one. . . "

There was a two minute silence after which another toast was proposed.

Again Professor Cornstone lifted his glass.

"To the men who will never again know harsh winters – only a warm, summer breeze as Arthur the True leads them to the valley of our maker. To these we say – thank you – and farewell."

The gathering responded with "Thank you, and farewell!" and then all took a small sip from their drinks.

Without anyone prompting or leading the way, they all slowly walked to the window and looked out towards the Irish Sea – a shimmering, silver shroud in the bright, cloudless moonlight. On the horizon, touching the sky, were the eleven men of the WSS slain in battle, now in knights chain-mail and riding black chargers behind their beloved King Arthur. They rode on beyond the horizon and one by one they disappeared, until only one remained in sight of our sad fellowship.

He stops – turns his horse to face them – he raises the Magic Flag of the Magical British Isles which flutters in the breeze – he smiles – his horse rears up in salute – they turn – he is gone.

Ezekiel Creek was in tears. One of the slain was Corporal Croke. The two had become good friends; this was after the same terrible mix up which had seen Ezekiel and Josh become sworn enemies.

Professor Winch looked solemnly on with tears in his own eyes.

Around the room were similar sights as friends and colleagues consoled each other in their sadness at such sacrifice.

Professor Winch said another private thank you to the slain and then sighed. He needed to move on quickly if he was to help the cause of the living.

Although the conference had covered the most pressing issues, there were some things which had not been dealt with and certain formalities and niceties which had not been conformed to. This was not of Professor Winch's design, but more to do with the second by second ever shifting fluid fortunes of both friend and foe – and more than a little to do with the prolonged row between Josh, and himself and Professor Pendragon.

There were some things involving his closest confidants and confidantes which could be discussed once back at Hemlock Hall during one of his cosy chats. He particularly had in mind the current relevancy of the Addendum to the Book of Chaotagens, which had had to go on the back burner but which still needed consideration. However, he knew he had to try and say something to the people who had been unexpectedly marginalised. These were mainly the ancient wizards of the WFW Council and the two Magic Council men, but there were others as well.

Professor Winch made his way around the room as if looking for someone. Although the atmosphere was still subdued, people still managed to chat quietly and partake of the buffet Jean Michelle had prepared. He had planned to make it a sit down affair but had changed his mind at the last minute, realising that movement creates hubbub which would be a welcome diversion from very recent events.

First of all, Professor Winch went up to Professor Pendragon and shook his hand.

"Good luck, Aloysius. They may have started without you, so to speak, but it's still necessary for you to be there. Goodbye for now, my friend."

"Goodbye, Gabriel, we'll win through, I'm sure of it." Professor Pendragon left to attend to pressing matters in Romania.

Professor Winch passed big Jez who was reminiscing with Ernst and enthralling Gregor with a rose tinted version of life at Hemlock Hall and around the village.

Professor Winch gave him a suspicious stare as he overheard the conversation:

" . . . And next thing is, old Corny loses 'is kecks, see. He can't do nothing else but streak right out of the farm, showing his bony bum to old Milly Harris, who faints and falls to the ground. Anyway, there was Bezzie right behind him, snortin' away and goin' wild trying to shake off ole Corny's kecks off his horns. And then . . . oh – er – hello, Professor."

"Hmmm," said Professor Winch, walking on.

He espied Marina and Laszlo, sitting on chairs against the wall, pouring out large brandies for themselves and missing the glasses. He smiled but said

nothing, but as he passed by, Marina stood up as she had decided to circulate. Unfortunately, she slipped and crashed into the table which then collapsed at one end. As she sat there, dazed, covered in brandy and generous helpings of quiche, a large meat pie was jettisoned off the other end. Professor Winch inwardly groaned as he knew what was coming. In the true traditions of Murphy's Law, Bertie, who had been standing on his own and out of the way for the last ten minutes, was suddenly invited over by Ren Stannich to sit with him. As he walked across he found himself in the line of fire of a highly edible projectile. Oh dear . . . but no, not singing. . .

The usually silent when he's not singing Bertie burst into life, but on this occasion he became a cheeky Cockney comedian with his own wicked brand of observational humour. The first person his alter ego saw was Miss Daphne Llefevre.

"Hello, my love! Never mind, never mind! The plastic surgeons can't get it right all the time! Only joking, friends, only joking! They'll put her right!" However, wearing a frown on his face and with his hand on his chin, he stared again at Daphne even more intently. "Hmmm – on the other hand!"

Daphne was at first too shocked for words. Professor Winch explained that it was obviously the essence of a real comedian magically transferred into Bertie during his little sojourn in the electronics and music shop. He surmised that the comedian must have been on a radio show and that somehow, his and Ren's modifications to Bertie had caused this diversion from his usual self, bringing to the fore our chirpy and very cheeky friend. Daphne could only say, 'And that's supposed to make me feel better?! Yeeer!'

Bertie then focussed his attention on the most ancient and esteemed wizard of the WFW Council, Septimus Twigg, the WFW'S head Spell-Checker.

"And you, sir, yes, you with the beard to kill for! My, my, you are ugly, aren't you?! Your mum feed you with a catapult when you were a baby, did she? Never mind! Only joking, friends, only joking. And what about this metrication lark?! It's a right 'ole rip off, ain' it?! Went into the butchers the other day and came out with two kilometres of sausage! Cost me a fortune it did. Shockin'!"

Bertie spotted Professor Cornstone.

"Well well well! Look at the mush on this sourpuss, folks! Looks like his face got stuck in a face-pulling competition. Did yer win, sir? No?! Why not?! I'd have asked for a re-count!"

An enraged Professor Cornstone spluttered on his pint of beer and stormed off to the end of the room.

While most in the room could only stand and stare in amazement at Bertie's antics, Professor Winch, Ren Stannich and others of the WFW Council were huddled in a group, frantically thinking of something, some spell, even something drastic of non-magic origins to stop this relentless comical tirade. Marina, who normally carried just the thing to stop Bertie was out for the count, and Laszlo did not know where she kept it.

There was no inspiration forthcoming from the magic scrum as Bertie

thundered on.

"This opera lark's a load o' hooey 'n' all! Same ole fing, ain' it? Some fat woman in a Viking helmet called Broomhilda sings loud enough to smash a glass, and then she dies! I tell ya this, folks, if my old lady ever sings like that round our 'ouse, she'd die 'n' all!"

Unfortunately for Jez Gildebrand, his reminiscing had made him rather dry-throated. The giant smithy and farrier was on his way to the bar to get the beer in for the lads, but he too had been spotted.

"Oh my, oh my! Aren't you a big strong lad for yer mother?! Yer can forget abaht them crop circles, folks! Aliens? Nah! It's just this fella here crashing out in the fields after a belly full in the Pig and Whistle. In fact, after he's left, it's just the Whistle! And let's not forget our dear old Mr Mainbr—Uuugh!"

Bertie was now lying on the floor, unconscious, slightly bruised but not badly hurt. More importantly he had stopped his gagathon as it is difficult to be a cheeky Cockney comedian when you've been knocked out by the type of man who not only wields huge, heavy loads all day long, but takes exception to your choice of material.

"Subtlety is not your forte is it, Jezmond?!" exclaimed Professor Winch. "And thank goodness for that. Well done!"

Relative calm returned and Professor Winch continued surveying the room for his fellow members of the WFW Council. He saw that old Engelbert was preparing to leave with his esteemed colleagues and quickly went over to him to apologise.

"Engelbert, old fellow, I thought I had better have a word with you before you go. I am very sorry that you and the fellow members of the Council were not consulted on much this evening, but things did not quite go to plan. I just want to say that—"

Engelbert smiled and interrupted Professor Winch. "Do not worry, my old friend. I have spoken with the others and we are all in agreement with what you plan to do, including allowing young Michael to be a hostage. And you have no need to be so diplomatic, you are after all – the leader of our Council – are you not. . . ?"

"Yes, but I should consult first and decide later. I gave none of you any opportunity to discuss and maybe even disagree, did I?"

"And would you have changed your mind if we had have disagreed? Not that we do!" said Engelbert, still smiling and deliberately emphasising that all was well between Professor Winch and his fellow Council members.

"I suppose not, but you are very kind to put it like that. Thank you, Engelbert, and please thank the others for me."

"I will do that for you, Gabriel, but I also promise you this, if it makes you feel any better: I promise that should we ever disagree with anything you say or do, we will let you know at the earliest opportunity!" said Engelbert with an even bigger smile. He gestured to his fellow members. They all closed their eyes, and disappeared in an instant.

Professor Cornstone was surprised by the mode of their departure and walked over to Professor Winch. "I thought all that malarkey is out at the moment?"

"Not for them. I may be their leader but they can still show me a thing or two, Zenith or no Zenith."

Professor Winch politely smiled and walked on. He saw Horatio Mainbrace, Lord Mayor of the Magic Council of the British Isles, and his deputy, Alderman Beauregard Fenmarsh. They were sitting down enjoying some gateau and a light ale each to wash it down.

"Ah, my two favourite men from the Magic Council," lied Professor Winch. Horatio frowned while the still politically naïve Beauregard smiled at what he thought of as just banter.

"Hello, Gabriel," said Horatio, "I missed an Empires match on Magivision tonight, should have stayed in and watched it after all."

"I do apologise, Horatio, but you must realise that we are virtually at war and war is a fluid situation. Anything can and usually does happen. I don't want to sound presumptuous, but such escalation in bad tidings means there has to be WFW jurisdiction over the British Magic Council, indeed, over any country in our community. I hope you understand this."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so, I conceded as much to Beau before," said Horatio, whom Professor Winch knows deep down not to be that bad. Horatio Mainbrace continued: "Dreadful carry on before, old man. Dreadful. Thought we were all goners."

"Yes, dreadful. Absolutely. Still, we must fight on . . . and how's the high flier?" joked a deliberately less sombre Professor Winch, turning to Beauregard Fenmarsh.

"Very well, thank you, Professor, or at least now I am. Thought I was a wolf-whale's dinner back there!" replied Beau.

Professor Winch spotted a huge curry stain on Beau's robe and noticed that two buttons were missing off his undershirt. "More of a dog's dinner, eh?"

The good sport that was Beau knew he'd been rumbled for having a less than sartorial appearance. He laughed and then returned to his gateau as Professor Winch continued his explanation of certain irregularities.

"The thing is – erm – this is difficult without sounding elitist, but it is very unlikely we would be doing things any differently, even if either of you had contributed to any of the discussions, and, forbid the thought, we had all disagreed. I just thought I'd better tell you this myself should the newspapers ever hear anything fifth or sixth hand and print some outrageous headline." Beau nearly choked on his dessert, coughed, laughed and said loudly — "PROFESSOR WINCH CALLS BRITISH MAGIC COUNCIL – PUPPETS OF THE WFW!"

"Beau! That's an outrageous thing to say! Even if it is true! Only joking, only joking! Hello, everyone! A sad night I know, but we must laugh where we may."

It was none other than Jacinta Morse who had been at the conference at

Professor Winch's invitation. Jacinta had come along with her husband, Nathaniel, and their two sons, Ted and Franky.

"'Ello, 'ello! Sorry I never got round to see you all earlier, but best laid plans and so on. Hello, you two, still giving the French a bad time?"

"Yes, you could say that!" said Ted.

"Not as bad a time as they give us!" added Franky.

Ted and Franky both worked as anti-smuggling officers for the Magic Council and were stationed at Dover ferry terminal. They were unseen by ordinary folk, but they were the bane of many European wizard-smugglers, and even a fair amount of perfectly non-magic smugglers who all swear blind that they had smuggled at least one more case of brandy than they seemed to have done, after unloading their car boots upon arriving home.

"Very good, very good." Professor Winch curtailed the levity and returned to business. "Seeing as you are here, although I've been peddling the same story all night, I'm sorry that neither of you—"

"No need, Professor. I know what you are going to say. I am just glad we came, keeping us up to speed and all that," said Jacinta.

"Up to speed, Jacinta, dear! That's very American. Come to think of it, isn't your hairdresser from Chicago?" said her husband.

Jacinta blushed and changed the subject. "My my, didn't Josh lose it tonight?! Still, he's become very attached to Mike, hasn't he? But at least we can all say, Josh included, that we only ever fall out over what's right, never what's wrong."

"How true and how very profound, Mrs Morse," said Horatio Mainbrace. "Come on, Beau, let's try and catch the highlights, eh? Well, everyone, goodnight to you all. Goodnight, Gabriel, that was very – er – flubabubbabub."

"Pardon?!" said Mr Morse, thinking he was going deaf.

"I think he said flubabubbabub, but I can't be certain," said Professor Winch.

"Oh," said Nathaniel. "Well, dear, we'd best be going, too, it's late."

There was the usual Masonic mix of hands and arms as warm goodbyes were said.

Professor Winch fidgeted slightly. He didn't want to be too open, but he had something important to ask of both Ted and Franky before they left. He gestured to both to stay a second while their parents walked on. He spoke to them in a whisper. "Thanks for being on stand-by the last week or so. I know our rescue attempt was foiled, so to speak, but will I still be able to call on you at a moment's notice?"

Both Ted and Franky smiled and gave the barest of nods, keeping in harmony with the clandestine Professor Winch. They then left to catch up with their parents. After the Morse family had finally departed, Ren Stannich came across to say his farewells.

"Excuze us, Gabriel, but I zink ve 'ad better go, ziss 'az been tiring night, zo ov to bed, I zink – espeshally for Marina, yez? Goodbye, and ve vill meet

again very soon, yez? Oh – one more zing – Ernzt and Gregor vishez to go to 'Emlock 'All wiz you for a day or zo. I zink zat Jez fellow 'az filled zer 'edz viz all sortz ov rubbish. Vud ziss be a problemz?"

"Er – no, Ren, no problem at all," lied Professor Winch "Goodbye, old friend, for now. I will contact you when we have the Time Crystals of Glastonbury in place, we'll discuss recruiting then. So long!"

As the friends from Krickenstaltz departed, a very embarrassed Gregor was nursing a sore cheek after being slapped by Ellen. Due to being a little older she had been allowed to stay, but had had to promise not to tell of what she had learned of the evening's events to the two children upon her return.

"No, you are not, Gregor Ojstott! You are taking me to New York to buy me an engagement ring, remember?!"

"Sorry, Ernst, it's off. You don't mind, do you?" said a blushing (and sore) Gregor to his friend.

Bachelor Ernst just smiled. "Not for me, old mate, I'll send you a postcard!" and he too waved goodbye and went back to his reminiscing.

The room began to rapidly empty and very soon all of the Krickenstaltz contingent bar one had left.

It was about an hour before dawn and a very tired Professor Winch called Jean Michelle. "I think that's it for in here, JM. Is it all right if the rest of us have coffee back in the restaurant?"

"Certainly, Professor! My pleasure, it's on the 'ouse, but best make it the Parallel Coffee Bar, I think that Jez and Ernst are becoming best buddies," replied a still relieved Jean Michelle.

Jean Michelle called over Maggie Gibson, a part time cleaner who had just turned up for her shift, and asked her to begin clearing up.

The kindly but sometimes forgetful Professor Winch intervened. (But those who knew him best would have seen a frown).

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear!"

"'Oo's gonna clean up, then? You?" said the stuffy voiced red-nosed char. "Huh! Men! They give you the night off and the mess is still there the ne-ne-ne-NEXT DAY-CHOO!" came the char lady's cur treply at the same time as sneezing very loudly, and rather surprisingly without reaching for a tissue, nor pinching her nose or holding her hand to her face, and even without turning away

Professor Winch frowned as he felt the flecks of spittle hit his face, but then he smiled at the lady and waved his wand around the room, which was immediately returned to a clean, orderly state. The leftovers, the crockery, the cutlery and the crumbs and spills just vanished into thin air, and the tablecloths were instantly cleaned and freshly ironed.

The woman screamed and ran off. Professor Winch had not seen Jean Michelle waving and mouthing something from behind her back. "NO NO NO! She's not one of us!"

When Professor Winch did notice, it was too late.

"Oh dear! I'm dreadfully sorry, but what is she doing working here?"

"She 'az worked for me for years. Every time I 'ave magic folks in, I just tell her they are from one of the shows!"

Professor Winch shouted for Daphne and quickly explained the situation.

Daphne dashed across the room and then waited at the window, looking down on to the street outside. She spotted Maggie Gibson, still screaming and running hysterically along the quiet almost deserted promenade. The seemingly terrified charlady got as far as the front porch of the Lady Lodge Guest-House. She stopped, was about to knock on the front door, but was soon stopped dead in her tracks.

Daphne opened the window and leaned out and aimed her wand. She exclaimed loudly:

'PERSONIO ADVERTICUM!'

Maggie Gibson was now a picture on the billboard directly across from the guest-house, advertising '*WIZZO MOPS FOR ALL YOUR SLOPS!*'

Daphne turned to a relieved Professor Winch. "I'll restore the poor woman later. 'Owever, I fink yer should go, Gabe, yer look done in."

"Yes, I am rather tired but I think I'll stay here, I think we all should, if that's OK with you, JM?"

"Yes, certainly, and it is of course, on the 'ouse," said Jean Michelle, who was beginning to wonder just how many favours were going to be squeezed out of him even though this was not Professor Winch's intention in the slightest.

But Daphne was puzzled. "Whatever for, 'Eadmaster?"

Before answering, Professor Winch checked to see if anyone else was within earshot. There wasn't. Ernst and Jez were busy chatting away and had remained in the function room. This made it somewhat easier for Professor Winch to speak openly. This was further helped by Professor Cornstone leaving for a constitutional along the promenade, while Ezekiel Creek was talking to Jean Michelle about a holiday in France.

"First of all, I am worried about Josh. I am worried that he may get hurt or even killed, and I'm worried as to whether he will ever speak to me again."

"Oh, 'Eadmaster! If anyone can look after 'imself then Josh can! An' as fer not speakin' to yer – hooey! 'E 'as a temper, we all knows that, but 'e'll be back. Why not go back to 'Emlock Hall now an' rest? Josh can just as easily get back there as 'e can 'ere."

"This brings me to my second point. Up until ten minutes ago that's precisely what I was going to do, but I'm afraid Ernst Stannich has unwittingly forced me to change my plans."

"Ernst Stannich? 'Ow's that, then?"

"Technically, that is not quite right. I am not being forced to stay here as such, it's more a case of being prevented from going back. I had hoped this little problem would never arise, but I now see that it might, unless I take preventative action now. I am certain Josh will head back here, I am equally

certain he will have Estella Grant with him. You may remember they were once sweethearts? But after Josh and Estella broke up, Estella Grant started seeing Ernst Stannich, and not long after, she was his fiancée . . . and herein lies the problem: Ernst broke off the engagement because he thought Estella was about to elope with Del Minsk, Letitia's elder brother."

"Del Minsk! Incredible! Do go on, 'Eadmaster. Yeeer!" said Daphne, all agog, biting into a chocolate digestive and moving closer to hear every word.

Professor Winch gave his trademark wry smile. "Pull up a chair, please do! Now, despite both Estella and Del correctly protesting their innocence in the matter, Ernst wouldn't have it and the engagement was indeed off, forever. For a long time after, Ernst hated Del with Zenithaic proportions, even after Del died at the hands of Professor Zenith. But I believe he has mellowed in recent years, so much so he wants to pay a visit – Ernst that is – not Del, he's still dead."

"But wha' really 'appened, 'Eadmaster?! Why did Ernst fink such a fing? 'N' by the way, Zenifaic ain't a word."

"You'll laugh when you hear this – or maybe not, the end result was tragic. On the very last day at 'Emlock – er – Hemlock Hall for all three of them, Estella went and somehow locked herself in her second floor room. As you know only too well, lock-breaking magic is not and never has been taught at Hemlock Hall . . . although at times I dearly wish it was – anyway, who should be walking past, but Del. Estella shouted to him to help and he said he would fetch the caretaker's ladders. This was unfortunate to begin with as Harry Gripweed was on holiday, and as we know, old Toke wasn't overly helpful, was he? Del sneaked into the shed, and when he returned, Estella said something about old Toke being furious if he found out. This is the worst bit. Estella began to climb out of her window and down the ladder, and Del shouted, 'Don't worry, we'll be a long way away before he ever finds out,' at exactly the same time as Ernst came around the corner.

"Despite repeatedly trying to explain what had happened, Ernst just would not believe them. Eventually they put some doubt in his mind over his own conclusions and he ran upstairs to check that the door was indeed locked. It wasn't. It was wide open. I'm afraid it was dear old Trixie who had unwittingly made the situation far worse than it already was. She had wanted to retrieve a book or some such trifle, had noticed the door was locked and so used her own key. That was it. Ernst stormed off and he's never been back to Hemlock Hall since, barring, of course, the fleeting visit very recently to rescue Mike from an eternal void in time and space.

"So now do you see why I do not wish Estella to come face to face with Ernst, at the school, or anywhere else?"

"Oh dear, oh dear." Daphne shed a few tears upon hearing such a tragic story.

"Don't cry, my dear," said Professor Winch. "These things just happen. It's very sad, but there it is."

Daphne wiped away her tears. "Wha' are we gonna do, 'Eadmaster? Even if

we all stay 'ere, Josh will surely want ter go back to 'Emlock 'all later on, and wiv Estella."

"The trick is – one in, one out. If it's good enough for our enemies, it's good enough for our Romeo and Juliet."

"I'm sorry, 'Eadmaster, I don't quite foller yer, what d'yer mean, exactly?"

"Just like we are planning to confound our enemies I think we should do something similar for our friends. I would not deny Ernst a night's stay, but I'll have to think of something to get him on his way again at the same time that Josh and the rest of us are returning to Hemlock Hall."

"You've overlooked one fing. Warrif Josh won' buy it? If 'e still insists on goin' back, Estella will undoubtedly follow. If she's bein' brought in from the cold, then she 'as nowhere else ter go. I'm sorry, but I fink it's too risky."

"Hmmm – yes, yes, you are quite right, it is a risk – but we'll have to try. Now, Daphne, my dear, I do believe you need your beauty sleep, so I suggest you—"

"Eadmaster! Wha' on earf d'yer mean by that?!"

Professor Winch quickly became flustered. He had simply meant for Daphne to get some much needed sleep, rather than suggesting as Daphne had surmised he was doing, that she was on the verge of turning into a wizened old hag.

"I do beg your pardon, Daphne, I only meant that – er – oh dear. . ." It was no use. Daphne stormed off, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief as she went.

Professor Winch sighed, but his thoughts soon turned to more pressing problems, but this soon turned out to be non-productive as for some reason he just couldn't concentrate. He decided it was time to finally call it a night.

Although Professor Winch knew Jean Michelle would have arranged a room for everyone, he didn't even have the energy to move from his chair, in fact he was now feeling a little off-colour. He yawned, took out a little silver fob watch from his pocket, opened the lid and turned a little dial round to a little figure three, placed the still open watch on the table, settled back in his chair, and went into a deep sleep. . .

A little later. . .

'ODDS BODDIKINS! ODDS BODDIKINS! ODDS BODDIKINS!' came the cry from a tiny silver wizard which had popped up from the fob watch, pointing an even tinier silver wand at the professor as he uttered his spell-cum-wake-up call.

Despite feeling unusually queasy, although Professor Winch knew exactly why this was, it was time to put his face-saving plan into action. He stood, yawned, stretched, swept the annoying micro-wizardy fob watch off the table, and walked back into the function room. There he found his titan of a friend, still keeping Ernst enthralled with tales of yesteryear. Whether the pair had had any sleep or not, he was not sure, but knowing Jez when on a jolly, thought the professor, they probably hadn't.

The professor walked past both men and smiled. Although no-one saw it,

sparkly blue powder shot out of Professor Winch's wand and up Jez's nostrils. Jez, who now had a big red nose, immediately started swaying. He demanded that Ernst and even Professor Winch join him in singing a few songs of the type usually sung in the bath after a game of Empires.

"Aaaargh, co-co-hic-c-co-come onanon'n, Perfessessessor hic! One ve-hic!-erse – one rottenen'n ole verse of 'Warrabahrabottleboodle?!' D'ya gerrit? 'Ave yer 'eard it? Y'sss-see-hic! There's this butlerutlerer called Boodle – an-hic!-an' he brings this bottle o' champaniainiain–hic!–into 'is Lordshipipippip sittin' ininin-in-nn-in the baaaaaath. Ha ha ha ha 'N' the ole feller ssssays – I never s-s-s-said – hic! – bring me any such fing! Haaa! Oh dear!"

Jez collapsed in a heap on the floor and was soon snoring like a pig.

Ernst was both embarrassed and amused. Professor Winch went up to him, shaking his head and holding his chin as he looked disapprovingly down at the village blacksmith.

"I'm awfully sorry, Ernst, but the only thing for this unreliable fellow is to go home and go straight to bed. Can I impose on you to take him there, right away? You were coming back with us anyway, weren't you?"

"No problem at all, Professor. I'll tuck him up and I'll be back here before you know it."

"Er – oh – no no! His wife's away on a visit, and – er – he's – er – he's afraid of the dark! You'll have to stay with him, I'm afraid. He has a big comfy settee in his room, so you'll be OK."

"This fella?! Afraid of the dark?! Wait until he sobers up! I'll milk this one for years!"

"Er – yes – you do that! Goodbye!" said Professor Winch, followed by an almost silent 'oops,' as it was still broad daylight outside.

Amazingly this contradiction did not register with Ernst, at first, but after a cleaner, a real one this time, had opened the window blinds causing the whole room to be bathed in strong sunlight, a mystified Ernst rubbed his eyes.

With great difficulty, Ernst commenced dragging Jez across the floor so they could get to the foyer of the Top-Deck. Although he neither felt nor heard it, the TMG on Ernst's wrist got snagged on one of Jez's coat buttons, and it eventually came loose and fell to the floor.

Professor Winch went next door again. Thinking that both Ernst and Jez had gone, he contacted Josh and Estella who said that they would be there presently.

Meanwhile, Ernst, having managed to prop Jez up against the wall, raised his arm and looked at his wrist. No TMG. "Damn and blast!" He frowned and scratched his chin. "Can't be far away, I'll have to backtrack," he muttered to himself.

Back in the function room, Professor Winch's attention was diverted to the door and in walked Josh and Estella.

"Josh! Glad to see you back. Hello, Estella, I'm very relieved to see you again. I'm so sorry about Hillary, such loyalty to the end. Amazing."

"Yes, I know, I don't think I'll ever get over it, but I'm very glad to see you again, Professor."

Estella walked up to Professor Winch and gave him a light peck on the cheek.

"Are you sure you are glad to see me again, Professor?" asked Josh.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life. As it happens, things have changed and it's just as well you forced the issue with the warlocks, the quicker they retreat back to their homeland the better, but I'll tell you more of that later. For the moment just relax and have a coffee. One thing though, it has become necessary for us to stay around here for a while, just as a precautionary measure."

This last sentence had been made up on the hoof by Professor Winch, and he could only hope he wasn't going to be questioned too much on the reasons, and preferably not at all, but. . .

"Why's that then, Professor? Why stay in Blackpool? Are there more attacks expected around here or something?"

"Yes, that's it."

"What? More attacks?"

"Yes."

"By whom? The League of Mordred? Warlocks?"

"Er – warlocks."

"What? There are other brigades of them up here?"

"Yes."

"Kerantzky's men.?"

"Er – n – ye – no."

"What?! The Warlocks of Ernyerno?"

"Yes. The Warlocks of Ernyerno."

"Are they allied to Kerantzky's lot, then?"

"Er – nnn – yes."

"They are allied to the Warlocks of Ernyes?"

"Yes."

"Never heard of 'em. Where's the coffee?"

"Phew!"

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. The pot is over there on the table."

While this inane conversation had taken place, Estella, who was far more perceptive in certain ways than Josh, had smiled to herself as Professor Winch had struggled to remain plausible with his economic version of the truth. However, the Professor began to relax as he knew that Josh had not dwelt on the matter. He also breathed a sigh of relief that all seemed to have gone to plan with regards to getting Ernst well on his way to Hemlock Hall, but then Professor Winch's eyes opened wide. "Oh no, how could I have forgotten. . . " he said to himself. He had suddenly remembered that the school was still not yet an official destination nor embarkation point when transmuting. However, the worrying over the possibility of a magic-powered

journey going horribly wrong was quickly displaced by worries of a different kind entirely. This was on top of the Professor now feeling distinctly feverous.

A certain someone walked back into the room.

"Hello again, everyone! None of you have seen my TMG have you? I seem to have—"

"Ernst!" exclaimed Estella.

"Estella!"

Professor Winch put his head down. Josh just sat there open mouthed.

Professor Creek tried to think of something to say to help, but couldn't so said nothing.

Estella and Ernst stared at each other. They were both astounded. One of them was glad to see an old friend, the other was not.

Unfortunately for both of them, this tense awkward situation was made worse by the rest of the Hemlock Hall contingent drifting back into the function room after their brief rest. A red-eyed Daphne just glared at Professor Winch – while Professor Cornstone, back from a liquid lunch, looked around, quickly weighed up the situation – and smiled wickedly.

"Coffee, anyone? No? Is that seat taken?" and he too sat down and said no more – but unlike the others, he waited in delight for the inevitable emotional thunderstorm.

45

The Magnificently Dirty Nineteen

THE ATMOSPHERE in the Parallel Coffee Bar was so tense you could cut it with a knife.

"A slice of atmosph – er – cake, anyone?" asked Jean Michelle, who thought his guests might fancy a snack. He took one look round and quickly departed, with cake in tow. The silence seemed to last an eternity.

Eventually, Estella, who had gone for another coffee just before Ernst came back in, finally spoke while standing there holding the coffee pot.

"What a surprise, Ernst. I – er – thought you had left the fold a long time ago."

"Nope. Still here as you can see, no thanks to you."

"I'm sorry, Ernst, but us meeting here like this tonight is not my doing any more than it's yours."

"I'm sorry, Estella, that doesn't make things right, and it certainly doesn't make me feel any better."

Estella tried not to be drawn into an old, played out argument.

"Look, Ernst, this was all a long time ago. Why don't we sit down and work it all out like adults?"

"I worked it all out years ago, remember?! You and that Del Minsk! I wish you two had run off after all! But here's an idea! Why don't you run back to him right now?! I can assure you I won't try and stop you!"

"Ernst! What are you saying?! What are you talking about? Poor Del is dead! Is that what you wanted?! Is that what you want for me as well?!"

"I never said that! And you know it!"

The two stared at each other with fury in their eyes. Although Professor Cornstone was of course an exception, most of the gathering were totally shocked and were more than a little embarrassed to be privy to such a heated row.

It is during such moments of tension that Professor Gabriel Winch would normally by jest or insistence intervene and calm things down, but on this occasion he remained uncharacteristically silent. Unbeknown to the others at that moment, he was uncharacteristically ill.

Ernst offered no further insight on his twenty-five year old suspicions as the tense silence returned – and he and Estella just stood there, looking at each other.

Eventually, Estella became aware of how it all looked to the others, and with embarrassment and more than a touch of sadness she began to tremble. If the person standing before her was a dire enemy she would have toughed it out, even if under the threat of death; but this was Ernst – her

good friend – if only he could allow himself to be.

They were surrounded by people they had both known for many years; being such a sad focus of attention in front of them was too much for Estella and she burst into tears. She covered her face with her hands, dropping the coffee pot in the process, but Ezekiel kept it levitated and guided it back to the table.

A seemingly heartless Ernst looked down. He also felt like bursting into tears but treated the too public situation as if he was in the hands of the enemy. Unlike Estella, he was very definitely toughing it out.

Daphne could not tolerate seeing an old friend so upset any longer and went to comfort her. At the same moment Josh decided to tackle Ernst.

"Now listen here, Ernst! Don't be making Estella feel guilty all over again! Even if you still think what you thought then, which you were totally wrong about by the way, then tough! You've got to forget it! You've got your life, Estella's got hers. Come on man, be sensible!"

Ernst's face was like thunder. The rest of the unsettled crew could only sit and witness such a display of anger.

"Oh we all know your game, pal! This is about YOU! – isn't it?! Didn't get it right first time so you are trying to win her back at my expense. I can read you like a book, Beechy Bonce!"

"AT YOUR EXPENSE?! You've not bothered with her or seen her yourself for years! Just you listen and listen good! Yes, I messed up, there! I've said it! Are you happy?! I messed up! But Estella and I are friends now, got it – friends! You could be as well! I just want her to be happy, which is something you are still putting in jeopardy. I suggest you go to wherever it is you were going to and leave the rest of us alone!"

"Not now I'm not, pal! I was off to Hemlock Hall, but if you two are going to be there, then I'm not!"

"That suits me, chum! And I'm sure it will be just what Estella wants to hear."

But by this time Estella had recovered. She stood, fastened her coat and began to walk out.

"I'm going. I can't have this. I'm not being the cause of such upset, especially at such a worrying time for everyone. . . you're better off without me, all of you. . . "

Estella reached the exit but then turned back one more time. "Thank you, everyone, goodbye and good luck, even to you, Ernst." Estella left the room, and once more there were tears in her eyes.

A sad Ezekiel Creek shook his head and looked over with disgust at Josh and Ernst. Although he and Estella were not what you would call close friends, nevertheless there had always been a warm cordiality between them whenever their paths had crossed. However, it was not his place to demand that one or both should go after her, but his face told them both how he felt. This had the desired effect. Both errant former suitors looked at each other as if to say – 'You? Me? Both of us?'

But things were suddenly about to get far, far worse. . .

Breaking the tension and the silence, Estella, having left the room and was presumably now out in the corridor, gave out a blood-curdling scream which seemed to fill the whole building. Josh and Ernst jumped up, raced across the room and shot out of the door, but despite them reaching the corridor in no time at all, there was just no sign of Estella anywhere. At best she would only have had time to have reached the lift door, but Estella had gone.

However, this was not the only problem now facing the Hemlock Hall delegation. Ezekiel Creek had not left the room with the others, because at that moment he was standing over Professor Winch, gently rocking his shoulder.

"Headmaster? Headmaster, are you all right. . . ?"

But Professor Winch was just staring strangely into space and his face was ashen. Ezekiel Creek was now in a state of silent panic. Tension and embarrassment he could just about deal with, but for the situation to become critical on two seemingly unrelated fronts in a matter of just a few seconds was just too much.

Professor Cornstone had initially risen to also join the posse, but before he had reached the door he too had noticed that all was not well with Professor Winch. He looked from the living ghost to Ezekiel Creek, who was making a half-hearted gesture that he too would join the others to see what had happened to Estella, but Edwin had other ideas.

"Stay with him, Creek, if he's breathing . . . (Ezekiel meekly nodded) – he's alive. I can't be sure at this early stage, but I'll bet Daphne's best bloomers he's been poisoned. I'll be back as soon as I can."

In the corridor there was nothing but panic and confusion.

"What on earth made her scream like that?! Where has she gone?!" exclaimed Josh, with panic in his voice.

"I don't know, I don't know!" said an hysterical Ernst.

The unflappable Professor Cornstone looked for clues. It wasn't too long before he found something.

"Over here, everyone! Over here! If this is what I think it is, some of us have a little trip to take, right now!"

The others joined Professor Cornstone a few feet down the corridor from the restaurant, just by the lift door. He pointed down to the carpet.

"I'm sorry, Edwin, I can't see anyfink, what is it?" asked Daphne.

None of the rest of the crew could see what Professor Cornstone had found. He pulled out a little knife from his pocket and carefully scraped something up off the carpet. He then held the knife up to show the others. They could just make out a gooey blue substance with what looked like coarse fibres sticking to it.

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is one of the most virulent, pain-inducing, paralising potions in the world – paralysseum. It is an extract from the petals of the magmalia plant, found in only one part of the world – Schnarkenfeld, to be precise. But that is not all! See?! Next to the blue serum? A hair! A

wolf-whale's hair! Estella Grant has been paralysed and has no doubt been kidnapped and taken back to the ice-houses of the cannibal-elves, most probably to be their next meal!"

"But how can you be sure?!" demanded Josh.

"You, Beecham, did not fight in the Leprechaun Wars, I did! The cannibal-elves were allies of the enemy then, just as they are now. Who else would know of such a potion?! And you are not the only one to have fought rogue wolf-whales. I too fought against them many years ago. It would seem as if we still have one revenge driven cannibal-elf and one fare-carrying renegade wolf-whale left to fight."

"But what do we do? How do we save Estella?" asked Ernst, beside himself – and feeling very, very sorry as he felt responsible for having made Estella leave due to his stupid patter.

Professor Cornstone furrowed his brow in thought, but only for a moment. It is at times like these that show that one does not have to be nice to still do the right thing. He strode back into the coffee bar. "Ezekiel! Get the Headmaster and Gildebrand home – stay there! Contact Ojstott at Krickenstaltz, we'll need him." He then stuck his head back out of the door.

"You two – broomsticks, battle-wands – now! I'll get my bag of tricks."

"Oy, you lot? What's going on?!" said Jez, walking back in and rubbing his throbbing head and washing machine on full cycle stomach at the same time, wondering why he had been propped up against the wall of the restaurant.

Ezekiel Creek finally stirred himself into action.

"Jez, liven up, man! I'll explain later, but for now help me with Gabriel. We're going back straightaway, and don't ask me how!"

Ezekiel Creek and his two less than fit and healthy colleagues, and poor Daphne who had had to remind the unwitting chauvinists of her presence, then endured a nightmare journey back to Hemlock Hall.

First of all they took a trip in a taxi back to Bispham, at the end of which it was difficult to tell who was more relieved, the taxi driver or Ezekiel and co. It was then time to take the precarious next step of ringing the doorbell of one Professor Barnabus Mudthrupple. Due to obeying the strictest of orders never to answer the front door once the sun had set, Barney Mudthrupple's housekeeper watched from way back in the hall in her dressing gown and curlers, as an even angrier than before Barney Mudthrupple answered the door. The old curmudegon, standing there in nightgown and cap and holding a candle, begrudgingly let the distressed group in to the house so they could make use of his television. He had initially thought of poisoning them, but decided on just getting them on their way and out of his sight as soon as possible.

Eventually they made it back, and Ezekiel did indeed call Gregor and told him to go straight back to the Top-Deck.

The only problem here was that Gregor was now sporting a second rosy cheek, as Ellen had thought he was sneaking back again for a lads' weekend! What was left of it. . .

Josh and Ernst were sitting in the coffee bar, impatiently waiting to begin their rescue mission. Neither man had spoken for almost an hour, but eventually Ernst broke the silence.

"I'm dreadfully sorry, Josh, this is all my fault. I do still love her you know. I hope we get there in time."

"I hope so too. One thing though, you have got to believe her when she says it was all a misunderstanding. She was not going to elope with Del Minsk. Do you now accept this?"

"Yes of course I do. I've actually known for a long time, but what I honestly did not know was that speccy Del had left us," said a regretful Ernst.

"I guessed that," replied the sardonic Josh.

"I suppose I was really angry with myself for all those wasted years. You wouldn't understand that, would you?"

"Wouldn't I? Little do you know me, Ernst, or more to the point, you didn't know the old me: but I now understand perfectly. More importantly, I have learned. Now it's your turn."

"Yes, yes, you are quite right."

"One more thing – don't call me Beechy Bonce."

After saying this, Josh deliberately smiled to ease the tension. He knew that both of them cared deeply for Estella, and all that mattered was to bring her back safe and sound.

Professor Cornstone reappeared and looked somewhat different from normal. He had his battle robes on which he had not worn in many years. These still looked like wizard robes, but were of a less showy cut, and had a great many plain but large pockets on the front and side. These were for an array of magic weapons and potions that a warrior wizard might use in battle. However, Professor Cornstone decided it was best to travel light and had his small bag of tricks, as he calls it, his battle-wand, and nothing else.

"Trust you to show us all up!" snorted Josh, and rather unfairly at that.

"If you want to be in the Road Workers Army, Beecham, that's up to you, so keep it shut! Where's Ojstott?!"

"Here I am, and my name's Gregor. If we are off on a long journey and into battle, let's try and be friends, eh?!"

"Hmmm – fair enough. Right, you lot, let's go."

As Professor Cornstone led them out of the Top-Deck, he sprinkled a purplish dust around the exit. This was known as Magic Debarring powder, or MDP. This allowed anyone using it to over-ride some of the effects of the Blackpool Right-Angle, and of the inherent limitations of parallel dimensions. The only slight drawback was that it cost one and a quarter million jupiters – a gramme. Professor Cornstone was now in the sky on his broomstick; following close behind were Josh Beecham and Ernst Stannich, and a little way behind them was Gregor Ojstott.

Professor Cornstone looked back and saw Gregor struggling on his broomstick.

"Gregory, if you don't mind, old friend, how about keeping up! It's a long journey and I think we'd best make it before dinner, yes?!"

Gregor, more used to riding horses than broomsticks, was about to yell back a comment concerning the deliberate Anglicising of his name, but instead said something along the lines of, 'Aaargh Scraggenthripz!'

Josh and Ernst were furious over Professor Cornstone's wicked comment concerning the possible source of the cannibal-elves next meal, but it's hard to be furious while riding on a broom stick at ten-thousand feet and two-hundred miles per hour, so they reluctantly let it go.

An hour had gone and they had left the land far behind and were flying in a two by two formation over the open sea. They were cold, but this was nothing in comparison to their worries concerning Estella.

"Hello, gentlemen, can you all hear me?" It was Professor Winch on the tele- magickeraph.

"Headmaster! I thought you were ill. Are you all right now?" asked Professor Cornstone.

"Couldn't be better! Can all four of you hear me OK?" There were three 'Yesses', and one 'Affirmative'.

"Gregor, I know you liked your time in America, but a plain simple yes would be fine," said Professor Winch.

"A–OK, Professor. Er – sorry, yes."

"Listen carefully, please, gents, I've some things to tell you all. Firstly, please stop if you would and hover a while. Gregor, can you manage this?"

"WHOOaaahh! Er – yes, I think so, Professor."

"Good. I don't know whether I'm sorry or glad to have to tell you this, but I have to ask you to forget about the frozen north and instead to head for Thornton."

"Again?!" shouted Josh.

"Again!" replied Professor Winch. "But at least this time it's on my orders!"

Josh did not reply to this, but allowed himself a grim smile.

"Whatever for, Headmaster? What about Grant?" queried Professor Cornstone.

"We've been tricked, all of us. It would appear that Maggie Gibson, supposedly an employee of Jean Michelle's, is in reality a spy for The League of Mordred. She managed to poison me and trick you all into thinking Estella has been taken back to Schnarkenfeld. This cannot be, because I have been in touch with Zoopnah and he says there are no rogue wolf-whales or cannibal-elves left."

"But how do you know this Gibson woman is a spy, Headmaster? And didn't Daphne turn her into a billboard or something?" asked Professor Cornstone.

"Yes, and then like an old but neglected Master, she was fully restored – by the WSS. She is now in custardy."

"I'm not sure if I understand you, Headmaster. What do you mean, exactly?" asked a very confused Professor Cornstone.

"The truth is, gentlemen, I recognised this Gibson woman as being one of The League of Mordred. Too late to stop her poisoning me of course, but I did indeed recognise her.

"It all goes back to when I indulged in more than a little jiggery-pokery to gain the confidence of one Professor Gemini Zenith. Some of that jiggery-pokery is still going strong today, especially in Blackpool. The truth is, I had formulated the Blackpool Right-Angle myself many years earlier before oil and gas rigs were ever heard of. After I had done this, I then attended a League of Mordred meeting disguised as one Ronaldo Blipp, Professor of Combined Magic and Sciences, and convinced Zenith himself that he could make the magic of Blackpool, his magic. I deliberately implied that should magic energy and ordinary energy be combined over water, then a powerful wizard could harness that power, and make it his or her own."

"I've heard that phrase before, Professor, but what does it mean?" asked a mystified but enthralled Josh Beecham.

Professor Winch chuckled. "Absolutely nothing! But it sounds good, eh?! So – I told Zenith and his evil brethren to gather around a cauldron supposedly containing a handful of sand from Blackpool beach, and a bucket of sea water. The truth was it was nothing more than a packet of chicken soup and a bowl full of tap water. I did add several cloves of garlic, though, can't have magic without an aroma now, can we?! As it steamed up I read out the contents from the packet in a very dramatic Latinistic fashion.

"After getting to the part about monosodium glutamate, which I repeated three times Latin style, I deliberately let it over-boil and spill over the cauldron and announced that the spell was complete. Since then, Zenith has been convinced that he has some extra-special powers emanating from Blackpool and its environs. The truth is, he is already a powerful wizard, but this deception has helped in manipulating the situation the way I needed things to be, and more pertinently, today it helped me identify one of The League of Mordred. This Gibson woman was present when I pulled the chicken soup caper."

"So I take it that means that if you recognised her, then she also recognised you, and that's why she poisoned you, Headmaster?" asked Professor Cornstone.

"Please allow me a little pride and just a touch of arrogance, Edwin. No, I don't think she did recognise me. Maggie Gibson, although I doubt if that is her real name, must have been told by Zenith that she would not be suspected by any of us. Zenith and his cronies have probably known for a long time that there are strong links between Jean Michelle and the elders of the WFW. In fact, we often leak useless flim-flam for their delictation, as it were, obviously emanating from these environs – doesn't do much good really, but it gives us a chuckle now and then. However, Maggie Gibson, I am sure, was put in place to listen and observe and of course, report. I think her job tonight was to cause confusion and chaos, in other words – create a diversion: poison someone from the elders while evil allies of Zenith, with

precision timing, put their plan into action to kidnap Estella grant."

"Hmmm, I see, clever devils . . . and are you sure you are fully recovered, Headmaster?"

"I am now, but it was a close-run thing. That poison could easily have killed me, but I got back to Hemlock Hall just in time, and with help from Daphne and Ezekiel I took a cupful of the antidote, and, well, here I am. . ."

"Thank goodness for that," said Professor Cornstone, and meant it, even though it didn't sound like it.

"But why Estella, Professor? I understand Mike's usefulness to them, but I don't understand what they want with Estella," said Josh.

"Hmmm – a little naïve there, Josh, are you not? Bad people think bad things. Moral or even rational motives have never been high up on either The League of Mordred or the warlocks' code of honour. However, revenge is a number one priority. They were fooled by Estella and for a very long time. That was reason enough to take her back by force, and why the enemy hatched their plot to do so, almost immediately."

"Wi-will we make it in time, Professor?" asked an extremely worried and even more penitent Ernst Stannich.

Although the four could not see it, Professor Winch frowned before giving an answer. "Again, it is simply not possible to know and foresee every move our enemies—"

At this point, a still wobbling on his broomstick Gregor interrupted Professor Winch with what he thought to be a genuine compliment, but simply showed his command of English to be sometimes less than perfect.

"Don't be modest, Professor Winch – Professor Stannich is always saying how much you know, he says that you are a know-all."

The thick skinned and understanding Professor Winch smiled. "Does he really?! I'll have to speak to him!"

Josh also smiled at this, knowing it to be a grammatical faux pas rather than anything malicious from either Gregor Ojstott or Ren Stannich, well, maybe not old Ren.

Ernst decided it was best to say nothing, but not Professor Cornstone.

"Dash it, Ojstott! I've a good mind to teach you some manners!"

Gregor, although not happy in the least at being at ten-thousand feet on a broomstick, is not averse to putting up the cudgels and duly raised his fists; but the last thing anyone who is unsteady on a broomstick at ten-thousand feet should do is let go. The broomstick nose-dived with a shouting, screeching Gregor still on it.

Professor Cornstone grinned and muttered, 'Serves him right', as he watched Gregor Ojstott plummet and spiral downwards to the North Sea, wildly waving his arms around like a particularly bad rodeo contestant. Josh Beecham and Ernst Stannich immediately raced after Gregor. They soon caught up with the terrified fledgling and got either side of him. They quickly calmed him down, straightened him out and escorted him back up to a still grinning Professor Cornstone. However, he was immediately snapped out of

his sardonic amusement.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! What on earth has happened?! Is there anything wrong?!" thundered Professor Winch.

"No, not now, Professor," replied Ernst. "A little mishap, but everything's under control."

"Not Gregor, is it?"

"Yes, it was me, Professor. Just a little rusty, but I'm OK now," said Gregor.

"Ha! Rusty! The nail has got to be used first before it can get rusty!" mocked Professor Cornstone.

"That's enough, Edwin. You will refrain from any further provocations. Understood?" demanded an angry Professor Winch.

"Yes, Headmaster. I do apologise," replied Professor Cornstone.

"Good. And so let us consider the situation at hand. Basically, we are stuck with the none too easy task of rescuing both Mike and Estella, and I mean just us – no-one else. All WSS squadrons have had to be deployed elsewhere for the time being. I have also—"

"But Headmaster!" interrupted Professor Cornstone. "If there is a large enemy force waiting for us in Thornton, we have absolutely no chance of succeeding! There are only four of us! I know there are many occasions where we cannot allow ourselves to consider the odds, but this will be suicide!"

"For once, Edwin, I take your point, and I have had to make a very difficult decision. I am sending you reinforcements. They, like you, are in the air right now. Some have not seen battle for years, others not at all, but it's the best we can do under the circumstances. You, Edwin, will take command of this irregular volunteer outfit, and Gregor will be your Second-in-Command. Understood?"

"Yes, Headmaster, of course," said Professor Cornstone.

"Very good. Gregor?"

"Y-yes, Professor, if you think I am up to it," replied a surprised but pleased Gregor Ojstott.

"I do indeed. And Josh and Ernst, do you accept this?" asked Professor Winch.

This was readily agreed to, even by Josh Beecham, who knows how to discern between nice, and effective, when it comes to warfare. He would forget his dislike of Professor Cornstone, for the duration, as Mike would no doubt have said.

Professor Winch smiled to himself and gave a sigh of relief.

"One thing, Headmaster, if I may? Do you have a battle plan you would like to tell us of, and how do you know it's definitely Thornton we should be going to?" asked Professor Cornstone.

"That's two things, Edwin, but I will answer you. As for any engagements with the enemy, I will leave battle plans and strategies and such in your very capable hands. As for being sure of where Estella has been taken to, she has

told me this herself. I quite often forget that her psychic powers are incredible. It doesn't prevent her being taken prisoner of course, but at least we can still communicate. But even this is not foolproof: shortly after contacting me, our old adversary interrupted, announced it was a party line and would Estella please hang up, so we cannot use Estella's ultra-honed noddle like a Satnav as and when we feel like it, it wouldn't be fair and it would certainly be dangerous. I'll even have to be extra cautious when using the telemagickeraph, but that's not for you to concern yourselves with.

"So – the enemy knows you are coming and you will have a hot reception, I'm afraid. And you won't have long. The warlocks are making preparations to leave the country, Estella at least managed to tell me that, but for now they have vacated their temporary base at Seldon's Farm and are now doubling up with The League of Mordred in the Steed and Vine Public House. It might be an idea if you become the new tenants at the farm, I doubt if any of our enemies would expect us to do this. It is absolutely essential that you succeed in rescuing both Mike and Estella."

"Erm – Professor? What about all this business about Mike having to remain a hostage?" asked a confused Josh Beecham.

"Ah, yes, nearly forgot. Our old friend Vlad has seen to that. He has acted so swiftly and so successfully that he has knocked things out of balance, resulting in an increased risk of a Chaotagen release. We now need Mike out of the enemy's clutches as soon as possible, but it's more than that – as you already know, Josh, Mike has done enough, and it's high time we brought him ho– er – to safety. . . "

Josh Beecham, not attaching any relevance to a slight uncertainty, grinned from ear to ear.

"What a huge gob you've got," sneered Professor Cornstone.

"Ah, shut it, misery. Professor, that's the best news I've heard all day, thank you," said Josh.

"It's Vlad you should be thanking. So please, head as fast as you can to Thornton, your other comrades will meet you en route. It's 2330 now, all being well you should rendevous with them around 0015, sooner with a good tailwind. Is there anything else before I go?"

"No, Headmaster, I think that covers it. I hope to see you soon," said Professor Cornstone.

The others echoed these sentiments, said their goodbyes, did about-turns on their broomsticks and recommenced their rescue mission.

With a strong tailwind rushing them on, the intrepid four had been flying south again for over thirty minutes when Professor Cornstone spotted something in the distance. The others also noticed something but could not immediately work out what it was. After a minute or so, strained looks gave way to that of recognition. However, this was accompanied by a deep, sinister frown from Professor Cornstone who muttered under his breath, 'May Merlin save me from these two blithering idiots.'

Josh's face broke out into a big, beaming smile, while Ernst and Gregor,

who were familiar with the advancing equine powered machine and were at least passing acquaintances of its usual incumbents, smiled too at such a welcome diversion. It was of course, Wimpole's Magic Caravan.

Fred Marsh the coachman shouted from above the cab. "Professor Cornstone? Gentlemen? Please come aboard. Professor Winch's orders!"

The horse clip-clopped on thin air and manoeuvred in front of Edwin and company, who had stopped and were now hovering. The rear section of the caravan opened right up and one by one the four wizards whooshed on board.

Three of them made perfect in-flight landings, but not Professor Cornstone. While in showing off mode he whooshed a little too fast, placed his feet on the deck of the caravan, skidded along, crashed into the closed door of the cabin and fell back on his broomstick, which was catapulted into the air and came down and smacked Daphne Llefevre right in the face. Although there were sniggers all round at this comic site, Daphne was not laughing. With a face like thunder, very red thunder with bits of bristle sticking to it, she knelt down and slapped Professor Cornstone hard across the face, just as he was struggling to his feet.

"Jus' wotch wha' yer doin', will yer?! Yer a flamin' 'elf 'azard!" raged Daphne.

Professor Cornstone rubbed his reddening cheek while muttering some rather unpleasant retaliatory oaths under his breath. Daphne was too enraged to say anything more and so just sat down again.

Meanwhile, Josh, Ernst and Gregor were all saying hello to a very familiar gathering on the magic caravan. These were the volunteer force hastily put together by Professor Winch.

Professor Cornstone, now sitting down but still rubbing his face, surveyed the motley crew, and concluded that Professor Winch had indeed acted hastily, far too hastily for his liking. Looking up and down the magically elongated caravan, Professor Cornstone groaned as he saw first of all a red-eyed, white-faced Jez Gildebrand. Alongside Jez were Ezekiel Creek, as well as Jacinta and Nathaniel Morse and their two sons, Ted and Franky. Also on board were Marina, Laszlo, a hopefully readjusted Bertie the Jukebox, the very elderly Mrs Agnes Pollett, and an equally aged Madam Florence Koslovsky, the school's music teacher and resident pyromaniac (according to Dutch), and Daphne Llefevre and Beauregard Fenmarsh. Coachmen Fred Marsh and Barry Wimpole, driver and owner of Wimpole's Magic Caravan respectively, completed the impromptu gathering. Fred just sat there with an inane smile on his face, enthralled at the comic mayhem.

"Er – Fred, old fellow – who's holding the reins?" asked Josh.

"Flippin' 'eck!" replied Fred. "I got carried away with the fuss!" He ran off to take control of the rapidly descending caravan with the still clippety-clopping Ned the shire horse plummeting with it. Barry gave a big smile and stood up. He made sure he had tight hold of the rail as the caravan was still plummeting.

"Nah's we're all 'ere, 'oo wants a nice cup o' char 'n' some cucumby butties?"

The magnificently dirty nineteen, unwashed due to their receiving an unexpected and urgent call to arms, and hungry and thirsty to boot, gave wholehearted support to this suggestion.

46

A Last Ditch Effort

(Back to the day before. . .)
THE FIRE was still raging in the barn.

At the same time, Mike was still wrestling and struggling with his captor as he was taken back into the badly damaged farmhouse.

He hoped against hope that Josh Beecham was still alive after seeing him fall to the ground, courtesy of the seemingly treacherous Estella Grant who had used her battle-wand in anger against him.

The new guard took Mike back to the dingy living room he hoped he'd seen the last of, and just flung him onto the worm-eaten sofa.

"Sturkenstazenshup thribaaxzen? Kereq! Thribaaxzen?" The wild-eyed warlock stood there snorting, expecting some sort of response. Mike was already getting used to making rough translations of this strange tongue. This was not so much by recognising the words which he could not possibly do, but by the facial expressions and body language which accompanied this Slavo-Germanic prattle. On this occasion he made a wild guess that it was any or all from – 'Sit there and keep quiet!' – 'No funny business on my shift, pal!' or 'Try to escape and I'll kill you!' – which on further reflection seemed to be the hot favourite. It certainly wasn't, 'Make yourself comfy, have a cigar, I'll be back with some brandy and pate sandwiches with the crusts cut off'.

Mike wiped the tears and soot from his eyes and the dust from his face. His bandaging and plasters had all come away leaving Mike looking like a lumpy, bumpy, battle-hardened veteran. He looked up at the raving Romanian and said, "OK, OK. I won't do anything daft."

The warlock, doing what Mike had done to him, saw the signs of resignation on Mike's face. He broke into a smile.

"Arh! Mike Miller, deftenroutenz! Fereq! Vundenzacker, fereq!"

"Yeah, whatever," said Mike.

The warlock quickly marched out of the room but just as quickly came back, this time with Kerantzky. Mike was expecting more strained conversation involving him, but the two totally ignored Mike as they stood there discussing something. Mike did not have any idea what it was at first, but both warlocks kept looking over to the rubble-ruined fireplace as if that figured somehow.

Mike suddenly heard a noise. He looked over to see what was happening, as did Kerantzky and his minion. All three stopped to listen: they could hear voices coming from behind the fireplace, muffled at first but which then became shouts. This did not seem to be in panic but more like the hailing of

a return from some adventure.

A large piece of concrete which had fallen from the ceiling and was lying across the front of the hearth, was suddenly pushed to one side by as yet unseen hands.

Once the way was clear, two warlocks covered in dust and grime climbed out from the fireplace. Kerantzky immediately bombarded them with questions. Again, Mike had no idea of what was being said exactly, but any fool could guess that it was something to do with what was behind the fireplace, and more importantly where it led to. so, Mike thought, a tunnel – but what of it?

"Cerkinazz grunskzepple ung Steed unz Vine?" Kerantzky asked of one of the returning members of his expeditionary force.

"Fereq. Zeeg digzen shoven spadz, vich ezzinfeg. Ventz Steedz unz Vine. Fereq," he replied. Kerantzky smiled. He uttered something to his prize pot-holers who couldn't dash off quickly enough. This was presumably to indulge in anything from a routine meal, washed down of course with whisky, or perhaps an extra bottle of whisky to go with their whisky.

Kerantzky then turned his attentions to Mike.

"Zo, Mike Miller. I 'ope you are ready to come viz us to my 'omeland. . . ?"

Mike just looked at him nonchalantly, but eventually gave a slight nod. He certainly did not want to go with Kerantzky, anywhere, but he decided that at the moment his best course of action was obedience, and silence. Kerantzky once again left the room and Mike just sat and mused over just how worse things could possibly get. He then heard a variety of sounds from outside; some of the warlocks were shouting, others were laughing and joking. There was also the sound of clashing metal, trundling wheels and a variety of other noises that made Mike curious. He decided to sneak a look at what was going on. He stood up and walked back down the hallway just as Kerantzky came back in. This time it was obvious it was not a fleeting visit to either taunt him or give him instructions, but to prepare to leave, and the way out seemed to be – the way in.

Mike was taken by surprise by Kerantzky, not so much by his actions but his words.

"Aarh, ze scum boy vishes to see ze superior magick ov ze vorlockz, yez? Zen votch and lern, Mike Miller."

Kerantzky beckoned Mike to go back up the hall and watch from there; obviously some kind of magic was about to be performed. Kerantzky held his battle-wand up in the air.

'GROSZENVARGEN TRANZPORTAZ UND PETTITENZAX ZAZZERVAFF!'

Mike felt as if he had been blinded by a dazzling white light. It was stronger than he had ever experienced before, even stronger than the light from the Knowglow. The whole of the hallway lit up. Gradually the light seemed to develop a purpose. While the outer doorway and its surrounds remained fully

illuminated, the light began to taper off from the ceiling, down and along the hallway and into the living room, where it dropped sharply but evenly until it reached the fireplace. The light matched the shape of the fireplace perfectly – a ghostly fire surround.

Mike was careful not to stand in the light itself. He did not wish to suffer any strange side effects of doing so, and neither did he wish to incur the wrath of Kerantzky should such an action disrupt the spell.

Kerantzky and two of his minions came back up the hallway. He instructed them to watch Mike, and then he shouted further instructions to what sounded like a large throng of warlocks waiting impatiently to come in.

Kerantzky turned and nodded to the two new guards. They beckoned Mike to move even further back into the living room, and Kerantzky barked out one final instruction to those outside.

"Kartenzz propenzix schkutter juzz! Ferazz fereq!"

Mike was astonished at what he saw next. The Warlocks of Bucharest were obviously decamping and they were doing so via the fireplace of the dilapidated farmhouse.

First of all, a troop of ordinary warlocks – if there is any such thing – tramped along the hall and into the living room. They were filthy, slimy and smelly. Each wore a similar leather tunic with a huge metal buckle around the middle. They wore leggings made from a variety of animal hides, some with the fleeces still attached, others without. On their feet were large oddly shaped wooden boots with leather and fleecy uppers. They all had long, greasy unwashed hair and straggly, dirty, unkempt beards – and each carried a battle-wand in roughly made pouches attached to their tunics.

The magic in force revealed itself to Mike.

As the warlocks neared the fireplace they began to shrink roughly in line with the tapered bright light. By the time they reached the hearth they had been reduced to about a third of their original size. They were able to walk right into the fireplace and were soon out of sight. Next came what seemed to be a combination of blacksmiths and storekeepers. Although the warlocks did not appear to have brought their horses with them, Mike guessed that the blacksmiths had been employed on other duties, such as sword and knife sharpening. He did not know a great deal about warlocks, but he did know, courtesy of Vincent, that they enjoyed a good old fashioned but nevertheless jolly deadly sword fight just as much as relying on magic and their battle-wands. These slightly less desperate looking of their number pushed along huge baskets on wheels containing hundreds of swords, knives, flails and a variety of other deadly weapons, giving the feared warlocks a murderous choice of arms. As these also neared the fireplace, these too began to get smaller along with their accoutrements. They did not find it so easy to get by, but after a moment's delay the offending concrete obstacles were soon pushed well out of the way. The mobile blacksmiths were soon gone. These were followed by a more domestic looking outfit. Their baskets contained a huge selection of household implements, even a few hundred broomsticks.

There was also one basket of sparkling cutlery and a few sets of crockery, all in pristine condition – they were likely to stay that way too. Next came the caterers. These pushed along baskets of bread and rancid sides of beef and pork. There were also skewers of marinated pigeons and rats, a vat on wheels containing wine, and more baskets containing hundreds of bottles of whisky.

Finally, along came six warlocks in three groups of two, with each duo carrying between them a recently used spit holding a half-cooked pig.

Kerantzky gestured for Mike to go next. He stepped into the light. Although he didn't feel any different he could tell from looking around as he approached the fireplace that he was getting smaller. He stepped into the fireplace, and stopped. It was pitch black. Although those that had gone on ahead had used their battle-wands as night lights, these were too far ahead for Mike to see adequately as he stumbled along. "Do not vurry, scum boy! Here!" Kerantzky did likewise and held up an illuminated battle-wand. "Valk! Zat vay!"

This wasn't difficult for Mike as they weren't exactly at an intersection of a labyrinth, it was just one long tunnel leading away from the fireplace of the farmhouse. Apart from an initial dip to give the tunnel sufficient depth, it had been dug out in a reasonably straight, flat and even fashion.

One thing Mike definitely did not like was the lack of either metal, concrete or wooden supports along the tunnel. The initial few yards had been strengthened with rough slats of wood nailed together, but after this it was just damp soil under them, over them and on both sides.

Mike walked on.

The battle-wand didn't produce that bright a light. At best the tunnel was lit up only by a gloomy twilight, enough to just about see by but producing an eerie, unpleasant atmosphere. This was made worse by the cold and damp and the occasional rat running across their path.

Mike did not know it but they were all walking along a very old tunnel used by priests to make a quick getaway in the days of persecution, although of course, the escape route was more likely to be from underneath a church and toward the farmhouse, rather than coming from it.

The tunnel went all the way from Thornton to the village of Sefton, more precisely to St. Helen's Catholic Church, to give it its original name. This became the Sefton Parish Church of Saint Helen during the Reformation, and was part of the then new schismatic Church of England. However, the warlocks were of neither persuasion and had no intention of staying in the tunnel to get to either Mass or Matins. They were taking a left turn about half way along, the trouble was, there was no left turn in existence – yet.

A shout was heard from further up the line. Every so often the cry would be repeated until the little group consisting of Mike, Kerantzky and the two guards could hear it. The message was to tell their leader that they had reached the optimum point for digging their way out, and which would enable them to finish their journey unhindered on the surface. The digging

party had all been agreed before leaving, and those chosen got on with the task while everyone else were sitting very cramped against the cold, damp walls of the tunnel. Kerantzky shouted along the line for food and drink for his little gang. A few minutes later they were happily tearing to pieces the innards of a cooked rat. Mike declined this foul delicacy but asked for water.

"Har! scum boy vontz vorter! 'Ere, drink ziss, it vill put – er – 'ow you say – ze cockles on your vorm 'airy chest! Yez. . . ?"

Kerantzky offered his bottle of whisky to Mike, who again declined. He was amused at Kerantzky's poor but certainly economic use of the English language, unwittingly combining two well-known sayings, and badly at that, but he did not let his amusement show.

After an hour or so another series of shouts meant that the dig had been successful. Kerantzky rose and gestured for Mike to do the same.

The line in the tunnel moved slowly. This was due to the whole array of equipment which had to be pushed upwards. Adding to the strain was the fact that they were all still about seventy per cent deficient of their usual body mass. However, as more men made it out of the tunnel, they became available to pull those still behind them up and out, along with their baskets and kit.

The line eventually began to speed up and about thirty minutes later, Mike found himself on top of the opening that had been dug out by the warlocks. He rubbed his eyes. When they again adjusted to daylight, he looked around and saw that he was in the countryside. They had come up on a grass verge between a country lane and a farmer's field that ran parallel with it. Apart from a housing estate to the west, Mike could see that they were surrounded mostly by farmland. The only other thing within eyesight was first of all, a cemetery – and beyond this, a large brick building standing on its own.

This was the Steed and Vine Public House.

Kerantzky took one look around him. His face turned to fury and he began yelling at one of his minions.

"Zo! Ve vud be just a few yardz avay from our alliezez?! Vot iz ziss?! Ve are no-ver near!"

The warlock in question, supposedly one of their more intelligent cohorts named Schtarp, began to tremble – and with just cause. He could see Kerantzky already reaching for his battle-wand, but then Kerantzky stopped, scratched his chin, and spoke.

"You are lucky man – today . . . but maybe not tomorrow, eh? Schkluzzenclotz!"

What Schtarp did not realise was that the rout they had suffered at the hands of Josh's posse was playing on Kerantzky's mind. Their badly depleted numbers had saved Schtarp's life – but Schtarp knew as does anyone who has had dealings with Kerantzky – that rational thought was not one of his more constant attributes. Schtarp was indeed lucky – today.

What Schtarp had done wrong was to misread a very old map of the tunnel that other warlocks had plundered from a monastery, many years earlier. He

had concluded that after a mile or so from the farmhouse, the tunnel was very near to The League of Mordred's camp in the Steed and Vine Public House. It wasn't.

Although they had indeed dug their way out at the nearest point, this was much further away from their destination than he had thought. This left Kerantzky with the problem of moving his men and equipment in broad daylight and running a very real risk of being spotted, even at a third of their normal size. This was not to his liking. The only time he wanted contact with strangers was when his men were in battle mode and ready for the kill – this they were most certainly not. He did not have a magic spell to make such a large contingent of men and equipment invisible in one go. He dared not to rely on his less than competent underlings to fend for themselves, and any thought of using broomsticks was also out, due to an even greater risk of being spotted.

As for any other variations on instantaneous travel, the warlocks, although loth to admit it, were hopeless. The last time they had tried it was when they had attempted to get from Bucharest to Paris. They had ended up right in the middle of the Los Angeles Freeway, and before the warlocks could escape to safety, one poor chap, Radzeck, was arrested by the LAPD Traffic Patrol for vagrancy.

There was only one thing for it. They would walk to their rendezvous with The League of Mordred. Kerantzky looked around. The quickest route was also the most exposed; the way which provided most cover would take at least twice as long. Kerantzky sighed, cursed once more, and bowed to the inevitable. The latter it was.

"Zeerzeck viz zajka fereq, kunozzki Steed unz Vine!" barked out Kerantzky to his men.

They lined up on the narrow grass verge, the order to move was given, and away they went. Progress was also hindered by their being perilously close to a ditch, which separated the verge from the hedging.

It had to happen. . .

Eventually five men and one basket ended up right in the ditch which brought about huge howls of laughter, even from Kerantzky, and from a careless Mike who just couldn't help it.

The unfortunate warlocks scrambled up out of the ditch, covered in mud, slime, frogspawn, and one even had a tiddler stuck in his mouth.

Kerantzky soon stopped laughing. He saw that the basket had split and that at least twenty bottles of whisky had smashed open.

Kerantzky growled for everyone to fall back in line and recommence their journey.

*

Mr and Mrs Shaine had just about had enough of their troublesome six year old son, Jonathan. He had spoiled their trip to do some brass rubbing in Sefton Church. He had continually run over gravestones, had pretended he was the ghost of Squire Richard Blundell, and had stolen some flowers from

a grave so he could give them to his granny. The Shaines had decided enough was enough and got in the car to come home.

'Probably for the best', said a relieved Reverend Waldrom as he waved the Shaines off.

They drove down Back Lane, a quiet country road connecting Sefton and Thornton, via the village of Lunt.

His parents were still fuming when Jonathan, who had been looking out of the window, shouted – 'Mum! Dad! Stop! Hedge goblins!' Mr Shaine, more out of fright at the sudden yell rather than the thought of hedge goblins, slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a halt.

Mrs Shaine, sitting in the front passenger seat, turned to her son in the back.

"How many times have we told you?! Don't yell at your father when he's driving! And don't tell lies!"

"But Mum! There are hedge goblins! Look!"

The Shaines had no intention of looking, but when Jonathan knew he was right, or to be fair to his suffering parents even when he thought he was right but was very wrong, he did not give up.

"There are hedge goblins! I can see them! Look! There they are! I'll give them a wave!"

The irony of the situation was later to amuse and bemuse both Kerantzky and Mike Miller, for it was Mike who saved the day. He had noticed the car, whereas the others had not. More importantly he heard the unique, clicky clunky noises of car doors opening which let him know that they were, perhaps, about to have some inquisitive ordinary folk on their case. Mike nudged Kerantzky and made him look to the road.

Mrs Shaine climbed out. Her son ran round from the other side of the car to join her.

"If we both look and there is nothing there, will you believe your father and I that there is no such thing as hedge goblins, or any other sort of goblins?"

"Yes, Mum," lied Jonathan, who was confident that he would be able to convince his mother otherwise.

"Let's look, then. Where are they?"

"They are just . . . they were – er – er – oh Mum!"

Apart from hearing a slight splashing sound which she thought was a frog or toad, or even a rat, Mrs Shaine did not see or hear anything resembling hedge goblins. With a well-clipped ear, Jonathan cried all the way home.

A multitude of sodden, mud spattered, slime covered, even more frogspawn covered, cold, fed up but ironically grateful warlocks, climbed out of the ditch – again. A still dry Mike had managed to jump right over the ditch and had hidden in the hedge.

"You are still scum boy and von day I vill kill you, but zank you," said Kerantzky.

"Er – that's all right," replied an uncertain Mike, learning more and more about the evil insincerity of such malodious beings as the Warlocks of

Bucharest.

The rest of the journey though difficult and laborious was uneventful. Sadly, for the evil wizards there was not even a single marinated rat left to share among themselves. Even more importantly, the rest of their equipment was stuck in the mud at the bottom of the ditch. They tramped on sullenly.

Their one last obstacle was a dog belonging to the farm which separated The League of Mordred camp from the country lane. It was asleep. The dog had not long eaten his quota of freshly killed rabbit, and was therefore oblivious to the warlocks and Mike as they skulked past him. They climbed over a fence, tramped across the bowling green and on towards the back entrance of the Steed and Vine.

In the lounge of the pub, which looked out on to the bowling green, Lieberman was enjoying a pint of mild and reading a newspaper. He was disturbed from his reading by tramping noises coming from outside. He looked up, and, as did all of his fellow League members, immediately covered his eyes as the lounge began to glow in the strongest white light he had ever seen. Kerantzky had performed the Reverse spell, the diametric opposite to the one which had reduced them all in size. They all trooped through the door, fully restored to their original height, but not unfortunately to their original state of relative hygiene.

The light faded and Lieberman looked at his visitors.

"Vot on erz 'az kept you?! Ver 'ave you all been?! And just look at ze state ov you all!"

Lieberman, who was well aware of the warlocks' lack of familiarity with personal hygiene, knew that despite this they were not normally covered in a variety of pond life, and just could not help but comment on their less than satisfactory state.

"Ziss vill not do! Ve can't 'ave place like ziss stunked up. All ov you, get clean in ze bath, now!"

Lieberman saw Mike, now sitting on a stool by the bar.

"At least you 'az got zumzing right, Kerantzky! Nize to meet you, young Miller. Do not vurry. Do az you are told and you vill be unharmed – yez?"

Mike just sighed and nodded. Next thing there was an awful commotion, and a familiar voice. . .

"Get off me! Get off me now!"

Estella Grant was being shoved by a League member into the lounge. She was deliberately being pushed over towards Mike. Whether this was to make it easier to keep an eye on two prisoners, or whether it was a noble act of some degree for two friends to be together was open to debate.

"Estella!" yelled Mike, "I thought you were one of them!"

"You were supposed to, Mike, but it doesn't matter now, I'm in the same boat as you."

Their reunion was briefly interrupted by Kerantzky, who up until then had kept an ignominious silence at being ordered by a League member to have a

bath. He spat on the lounge carpet just by Estella's feet.

"You did not fool me, Grant. You vill die, just like scum boy, ven ve 'az made you suffer first."

He spat again and looked down at the floor, returning to his sullenness. But his vile behaviour had been witnessed by Lieberman upon his return to the lounge after witnessing Estella's arrival.

"Do not spit in 'ere! Ziss iz not ze decrapid farm'ouse!" Turning to Estella, "But 'e iz right, Miss Grant, alzo suffering iz not my vay you 'az cauzed ze vorlockz great problemz. I vill not be able to 'old zem off forever."

Estella stopped grinning, although she and Mike did give each other a knowing smile at Lieberman's uncertainty regarding the use of either the word 'crappy', or 'decrepit'.

"I EXPECT NO HELP FROM YOU, OR ANYONE THAT WOULD ALLY THEMSELVES TO THOSE FILTH!" shouted Estella.

Lieberman smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Votever."

Kerantzky, in no mood to placate his ally any further, snorted, smirked, and spat again.

Mike the Valiant made a gallant entrance. Despite there being a very real danger to himself he was more concerned for Estella.

"Don't worry, Estella, we'll get through this OK, you'll see."

Estella smiled at Mike. She hoped he could not read her thoughts as she did not think that either of them were going to get out of their current predicament, at least not in one piece.

"I know, Mike, I know. Anyway, let's see if one of these pigs has any bandages and ointment, your head needs looking at."

"That's what my mum always says!"

Mike and Estella laughed out loud, sharing some much welcome comic relief while enduring their perilous captivity.

47

The Chauvinist and the Folk Singer

PROFESSOR CORNSTONE was sitting on his own, away from the others on the airborne caravan. He was trying to think – although he was finding this very difficult as there was a terrible cacophony coming from the other passengers. Old friends, new friends, all excitedly chatting away to each other.

"An' 'im!" said Daphne, pointing to the professor while talking to the other ladies aboard. "'E needs glasses! Or better still, lockin' up!"

Professor Cornstone just humphed and tried even harder to think. He looked over towards Bertie the Jukebox. "Hmmm – I've just the job for him, if Professor Winch can make a slight modification," he thought to himself. He turned to Josh, and shook his head. "Why did I bring him along?" mused the professor. "Still, good front line man, must not get personal over this." He turned his attentions to Jez. "Old, fat, but big and strong – he can sit on 'em." He unintentionally said this out loud.

"Beg your puddin'?" asked Jez, who, luckily for Edwin had been miles away.

"Sorry, thinking aloud, that's all. Stannich and Ojstott, yes, both with me as well I think. Ojstott is a bit quiet for an SIC though, I'll have to watch that. Yes, I've got the front line crew. What about reserves?" He cast an eye over Laszlo. "Small, fat, out of condition." He just didn't know how Laszlo would fit into the scheme of things as he didn't even fit into his pants properly. He left this particular problem for the moment. "Fenmarsh. Probably useless as a spearhead attacker, but he does have brains and he is young, fit and probably has a good stock of Field spells which he could quickly put together competently under stress. Yes, it's coming together now. I will leave Fenmarsh in charge of the second wave, which will include this infernal caravan." Professor Cornstone quickly scanned the ranks of ladies among the Irregulars, with quickly being the operative word.

The caravan was approaching its destination. Upon noticing its descent the professor snapped out of his musing. He had not finalised everything in his mind but the chauvinistic professor had decided to make the initial attacks on the enemy an all male affair. He suddenly had a thought. He climbed up to join Fred in the cab. Fred turned round, pulled a face, and just tapped on a sign about authorised personnel only. Professor Cornstone was not impressed.

"I've no time for your stupid niceties at a time like this! So listen up! I've no idea how the warlocks managed it, but we can't have the locals seeing us, we've got to make the caravan invisible."

Fred gave a strange smile. "We've been invisible since we picked you up – Professor Winch's orders." He coughed and again tapped the sign. Professor Cornstone left just as the caravan landed safely in the field belonging to Seldon's Farm.

The various passengers of Wimpole's Magic Caravan from Hemlock Hall via Blackpool and the North Sea to Thornton rose from their seats and scampered towards the exit.

"And where do you lot think you're going?" It was Professor Cornstone and he was blocking the door. "Just simmer down, the lot of you! This isn't the Ritz we are going to. This is by all accounts a rundown hovel of a disused farmhouse made even worse by a recent skirmish. We'll have to sort it out before we can use the place. Then there's the matter of the locals. I don't know how the warlocks fared, but I would imagine they were written off as tramps or hippies, but we can't take any chances."

Nathaniel Morse meekly raised his hand as if in school.

"Yes, Morse, what is it?"

"We often have this problem when organising our own country fairs and garden fetes. I can perform the False Scenery spell, if you like?"

"And what does that entail exactly?" asked the cynical professor.

"I could take a picture of the field next to the farmhouse, and, using magic, repeat the image which would then block out the farmhouse."

"And what if the locals suddenly realise they are missing a farmhouse?"

"Oh, I never thought of that," said Nathaniel Morse, while Edwin just smirked.

Jacinta squeezed her husband's hand tight as if to say, 'Never mind', but then spoke up herself. "I think what Nathaniel meant is, let's take a magic photograph of the farmhouse and use that to block the real farmhouse. The locals will then only see what they usually see, but we'll be in the real one without being seen."

"Perfect, dear, you always could explain my ideas better than I can myself," said Nathaniel, and squeezed his wife's hand to return the compliment.

"Notwithstanding the Morse Appreciation Society, that will do nicely. Regarding the inside of the farmhouse – it's ruined. We can either graft for hours or we can use magic. Does anyone have any appropriate spells for this?" asked Edwin.

"I do!" It was Daphne Llefevre.

The professor groaned, but knew he had to give her a chance.

"Yes, Daphne? What is your idea?"

"An Import-Export spell."

"A what?!"

"Unless anyone knows different, I don't fink there's a spell for the refurbishment of 'ouses, or farms or anyfink, so my idea is to simply get rid of the farm'ouse, that's the export part. Then we can order whatever we want from the Magic Real-Estate Catalogue. I've got one right 'ere – that's

the import part of it. Yeeer."

"Miss Llefevre, may I remind you that buying in magic property is highly expensive. I don't think Professor Winch would even consider such a thing. Does anyone el—"

"Yes, I would, Edwin. Do as Daphne says, it's a good idea," said Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph.

"On second thoughts, we are in desperate need. Hang the expense, I'll tell Professor Winch to his face when we get back. Well thought out, Daphne," said the professor, as he gave Daphne a glaring smile. "OK, Mr and Mrs Morse only for now: please leave the caravan and perform your magic as fast as you can. When it's done, we can all get off this infernal jalopy."

"'Ere! I'll gives yer jalopy, yer big sour puss!" said a highly offended Barry Wimpole. Professor Cornstone as usual just humphed.

They all looked out of the window and watched Nathaniel and Jacinta Morse go to the hedge at the side of the field and use their magic camera to take a picture. It gave one flash to indicate that the picture was taken, then after adjustments, another flash to indicate that the captured image had been projected onto the real farmhouse. One thing that was very fortuitous and yet unappreciated by all but Jacinta Morse, was that the projected image would remain that of the outgoing farmhouse and would not change to whatever was soon to replace it. However, as no-one asked about it, Jacinta did not mention it. Once inside the brand new soon-to-be magically imported house, they would all be invisible from any would be prying non-magic folk – up to a point.

"Erm – Professor Cornstone, what if someone wanders up here anyway?" asked Beauregard.

"Yes, good point. Morse?" said the professor, looking to Nathaniel, and wearing a face which suggested he was thinking, 'Get out of that one!'

"Oh," replied Nathaniel Morse with a start. "Well – er – all I can say is it's all to do with the necessary and unavoidable risk factor."

"Oh," replied Beau.

All of the Irregulars climbed down from the caravan.

"Ziss vill need gud clean, I zink," said Marina, as she surveyed the dilapidated farmhouse.

"My my, you have a very short memory, don't you? We're buying a new house, dear, didn't you hear?" said Mrs Pollett.

"Silly me, I forgot!"

While the men just stood around with their hands in their pockets talking of Empires compared with football – and beer, the ladies perused the Magic Real-Estate Catalogue.

They eventually decided to opt for a three-storey Victorian mansion.

"Such nice drawing rooms," said Jacinta.

"Oh yes, lovely!" – "And the décor! Nothing like it these days," agreed Florence Koslovsky and her friend Agnes. "Luvvly jubbly. Yeeer," agreed Daphne. "Such style and eleganz," chipped in Marina.

Professor Cornstone had hoped common sense would prevail, but upon overhearing the ladies he knew he would have to to intervene.

"A Victorian mansion?! Don't be ridiculous! Give me that catalogue!" Without waiting for it to be handed to him, he snatched it out of Marina's hands and turned immediately to the military section. "Here! Barracks style house – functional meeting room – catering – and dormitory sleeping accommodation. Order that! Now!"

This time it was Daphne Llefevre's turn to humph, but on this occasion she knew that she could not argue. She hurried everyone back to a safe distance so she could perform the Export spell.

After a further (and very loud and obvious) humph aimed at Professor Cornstone, Daphne raised her wand and held it out at arm's length, pointing it directly at the farmhouse.

'DEMOLODIUM DEFUNCTIMATEO! VILLEINABODICUS ERADICATUM!'

The rubble that used to be a functional farmhouse was gone.

Without much of an interlude Daphne went straight onto the Import spell.

'IMPORTIUM PARAMILONIA! BARRACKADIUS . . . YEEEER!'

There, in front of our amazed Irregulars, was their brand new headquarters, albeit temporary. It was just like an army guardhouse but a lot bigger.

"Erm – Professor Cornstone," asked Gregor, "we're probably not going to be here that long. Will this be left here when we are gone? Or is that spell geared up for the original building to be reconstituted at some point? Assuming the spell on it wears off eventually, then it might look very odd to the locals if the old farmhouse has gone for good."

"Hmmm . . . you'd have to ask Daphne that one, she knows the spell – not my department at all, but don't worry, laddie, we'll default on the first payment. The real estate people will whizz it back quicker than you can say – er – Jacovic Robinzka! As to whether the locals will ever see their farmhouse again. . ." Professor Cornstone deliberately left this last comment hanging.

"Ooh, blimey. . ." said a now worried Daphne, while the Professor just smirked.

Gregor, unsure of the British sense of humour which he at times found so strange, just awkwardly smiled and nodded. But Ernst, who couldn't care less about the ultimate fate of vanished farmhouses whether brand new or ancient and crumbling, reacted negatively to his friend and countryman yet again being joshed.

"Just you listen here, Professor! We may not be English, but there's no need. . . "

But the arrogant professor simply walked off, still smirking. So much for Professor Winch's cautionary words.

"Aargh, ignore him!" said Gregor. "My own fault for thinking I'd get a sensible answer."

The still smirking professor turned just as he neared the front door and gestured for the others to follow him in to their new quarters.

A few moments later they were all sitting around a table, with Professor Cornstone at its head.

"I know some of you may be tired and hungry but food and sleep can wait a while longer – we've work to do. You all know that we are here to rescue Estella Grant. Originally, the plan was to leave Mil – er – Michael Miller with his captors a while longer, but there is now an increased chance that all three components could be brought together, even if only briefly. This is due to Vlad the Impala's overwhelming successes so far, so much so he has jumped the gun somewhat.

"In my opinion the chances of this happening are not that much greater than before, but you all want to be certain of Mike's safety so we're to rescue both of them. Are there any que—"

"You don't give a monkey's, do you? It wouldn't bother you if Mike was tortured and killed, would it? You hide your hatred of him behind military strategy, yet I think you'd rather leave him behind because you see him as being some sort of hindrance!"

It was of course, Josh Beecham, who, like Professor Cornstone had quickly forgotten Professor Winch's warnings.

"May I remind you, Mr Beecham, that I am in command here! You may not believe it but I fully intend to bring both Miller and Grant out alive. This is the task we have been given and this is what we shall do. What more can I do or say which will convince you of this?"

Josh Beecham put his head down and muttered something under his breath.

"What was that?! Out with it, man! Let's all hear it!"

"Nothing, nothing. Just get on with it," replied Josh.

"OK, then," continued the professor, "the warlocks will not be around here for very long at all. They will most likely use the cover of darkness so I think we only really have a few hours to ready ourselves for the rescue mission, therefore I would like to go through a few ideas with you. OK?"

There was general agreement to this and the professor proceeded to put his battle plan before them – his male oriented battle plan with the bevy of ladies left behind to prepare meals and healing potions, and to clean the place up and so on.

"Absolutely outrageous!" roared Mrs Pollett. "We've come all the way out here at short notice to be char ladies and cooks! You just have a rethink, m'laddo, and be quick about it!"

The rest of the ladies all clapped and cheered their new spokesperson. The rest of the men just smiled, glad to see the arrogant professor so completely rebuffed by the supposedly fairer sex.

"What on earth do you suggest?! This isn't a game, you know! People can

get killed!" pleaded a desperate Professor Cornstone.

At this, Jacinta Morse pretended she was having a bad turn at hearing such terrible news which would seriously upset her fragile disposition. She let her head fall to the table, rallied again slightly, and then pretended she was fanning her face. "Oh, Heathcliffe! You can be so cruel! Speak only words of comfort to me!"

Everyone bar Professor Cornstone howled with laughter. The professor blushed and said nothing further until relative calm had returned. "If you've all got that out of your system? Let us think what we can do which will be agreeable to all. We need a small rescue party with a second line of both defence and attack if necessary, hidden just outside the enemy camp. I hope you have all got some solid ideas on this, because you've just about ripped my own ideas up in shreds!"

Marina, just like a know-all first grader, put her hand up and waved it wildly around as if to say, 'Me, sir! Over here! It was George Washington, sir!'

"Yes, Miss – er – Martina?"

"Profezzor Cornflake, zer. I zink ve cud do a Beeny-za-Meeny spell."

Professor Cornstone was highly uncertain whether an eastern European would really say Cornflake instead of Cornstone, but had to concede he couldn't do anything about it especially as he had just called her Martina, and also because he had not got a clue as to what a Beeny-the-Meeny spell was.

"Er – please explain, Miss – er – do carry on."

"Vell, ve make Mike into many Mikez'z to confuzed ze enemeez – yez? Zen vile zey are bizzy looking for ze wrong Mike, ve get ze right Mike. Oh, forgot, ve do ze same for Ezzie – yez?"

"Er – yes, Miss, very good, I'll consider it," said the professor, who was absolutely none the wiser. "Would anyone else like to add—"

"Never mind, Marina, I'll tell Mr Blue-Blood here what you mean. It's a perfect spell for what we need to do."

It was Ernst, yet again infuriated at what he perceived to be more mocking arrogance and elitism from Professor Cornstone concerning his kinfolk. "What Marina was trying to tell us all if only HE would have listened, is we create a multitude of Mikes and Estellas to confuse the enemy, thus making it easier for us to rescue them. With a little tinkering here and there, I think it's feasible."

"Oh! A Benny-the-Many spell! Yes, excellent idea!" enthused Florence.

This heralded a spirited discussion among the Irregulars about the usefulness of this highly bizarre magic spell, much to the annoyance of the chair, but it was not to last long as Professor Cornstone decided to reaffirm his authority.

"Address the chair, please, all of you. We may not all like each other, but remember who's in charge. Now this Benny-the-Many spell may sound good, but we will still need to get in the place. This may possibly kill the idea at the outset or maybe negate its usefulness once we are in there."

"Not necessarily," said Beau Fenmarsh. "I think it's well documented that breaking in to a jail or even a place acting as such is easy, because no-one expects it to happen as it's not designed for that purpose. It's the breaking out that is the problem. The fact is, although the enemy know we are due to attack, one of us can probably sneak in there. As long as the spell is performed there and then, chaos can set in straightaway. The rescued and the rescuer will then have a chance of getting out in one piece."

"Hmmm, still seems dodgy to me. No, sorry, still too risky, we'll have to pass on that one," said Professor Cornstone.

Upon hearing this, Beau Fenmarsh put his head down in disappointment, which the professor noticed. "Good try, lad, but we need to increase the odds of success."

"I'll go! I still think it's worth a try. Let me go!" demanded Josh. There were resounding shouts and cheers of support.

Professor Cornstone was about to again decline, but the highly vocal support continued and eventully he resigned himself to the situation.

"Fair enough, fair enough, although I've no doubt I'll regret this later. So – er – Mart – er – arina, please take us through how exactly we are going to generate an army of Mikes and Estellas, it would be handy to know just what piece of tomfoolery I've just signed up for."

Marina humphed before answering.

"Vell, first, ve need lots ov 'air from ze person, zen ven ze spell iz performed, zer vill be az many Mikez and Estellaz az zer are ze piecez ov ze 'air. Yez?"

This time the professor listened very carefully and got the gist of it, but then had a thought. "Do you know this spell as well, Beecham? Or can you teach it to him quickly, Miss?"

"No, I cannot, it takez many years to perfect. I vill 'az to go viz Josh."

Professor Cornstone the chauvinist was about to make a speedy return but just as quickly exited stage right. "Very well, Miss, if you are sure."

"And I am going too!" It was the up to then totally silent Laszlo. "If Marina's going, I'm going."

Professor Cornstone looked helplessly at Josh, in return Josh just shrugged his shoulders. The professor again resigned himself to indulging in consensus politics.

"Very well, that takes us on to back up. Wimpole and Marsh, I know you are non-combatants, but I do have to ask you to at least be near the action along with the rest of us."

"Blimey! If yers a sez so, Perfessor! I's'll doos me best!" said Barry, while Fred just nodded.

The professor tried but failed miserably to give a smile of sympathy and understanding. His lips curled round in the most peculiar fashion.

"Don't worry, due to the revised plans I shall also be on board with you."

(Upon hearing this, there were pretend sighs of relief and hidden smiles from some of the assembly of friends).

Barry Wimpole suddenly realised the possible implications of having his caravan, his pride and joy, involved in a military operation.

"If my caravan gets damaged I'll kick up such a stink! 'N' you'll have to pay for any repairs, 'cause I certainly ain't!"

Professor Cornstone was not in the least concerned over Barry's protest and again addressed the troops while Barry sulked. "I propose that we be ready to go about nine o'clock. I suggest we eat and then rest until then. Agreed?" Everyone bar the sulking Barry nodded.

Professor Cornstone furrowed his brow and put his hands to his ears. "Please excuse me, I have an incoming call."

With regards to catering, the professor was careful not to give out even the slightest hint that he meant for the ladies to prepare a meal. However, the rest of the men proceeded to just sit there twiddling their thumbs until they did just that.

A short while later everyone bar Professor Cornstone was again around the table, tucking into a roast dinner.

As the merry troop ate their meal and engaged in general chit-chat, the professor beckoned for Bertie the Jukebox to come over to the far end of the room. He bade him to sit and placed his left hand on Bertie's shoulder, and held his other hand to his ear. Bertie was being modified for the night's mission, and this was to be done by remote. Professor Winch spoke the magic spells down the telemagickeraph. This made the magic flow through Professor Cornstone and into Bertie, whose eyes were again a luminous red as they had been during the conference at the Top-Deck.

There were still a few hours to go before the off, and the band of irregular volunteers went off to get some well-earned rest.

Once settled in their dormitory, the rest of the men were surprised to find Gregor Ojstott sitting on his bed, strumming a guitar.

"Go on, Gregor, play us a tune, mate, keep our minds off things," asked Ernst.

"Nah, everyone's trying to get some kip."

At this there were reassurances from the others that they probably wouldn't have slept anyway, and for Gregor to play them all a song or two.

"Tell you what, shall I sing you a song all about the docks and the ships in Liverpool? It's called '*The Skipper's Lament*'. It's rather sad, really, but you might like it."

There were nods all round.

Gregor coughed, rechecked the tuning on his guitar and off he went. It was a slow song, the tempo being in keeping with the passing of a wonderful era – for some at least.

'This once fine port had thousands of ships,
and vessels of every kind,
but the pride of this city, is rotting away,
there's hardly a boat left behind.

The clippers, and frigates, and liners set sail,
for over a hundred years,
but now when it rains in Liverpool town,
it's the Mersey shedding its tears.

It's the skipper's lament, the bosun's farewell,
no longer to sail far and wide.
And the empty docks reminds us all,
how great was this city's pride.

From the Cast Iron Shore, or by the Pier Head,
or sitting on the Crosby Sea Wall,
there'd be tugboats and pilots, and small fishing craft,
you could sit and watch them all.

Now three-hundred men are turned away,
there's hardly a ship to be seen.
And before very long, the landing stage,
will become a floating museum.

It's the skipper's lament, the bosun's farewell,
no longer to sail far and wide.
And the empty docks reminds us all,
how great was this city's pride.
And the empty docks reminds us all,
how great was this city's pride.

Well, the Tall Ships they came, like ghosts from the past,
to show how life used to be, but the sounds from the river
are requiem bells, an epitaph for the River Mersey.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Gregor saw Josh put a harmonica to his mouth and beckon with his eyes for him to carry on playing and he would play along. This they did.

Although the subject matter had precious little to do with their task in hand, they were reminded of old news reels and films of soldiers in the trenches, singing songs from home to get them through the uncertainties ahead.

By the time Gregor and Josh had covered an instrumental version of both verse and chorus, the others had got the hang of the song and joined in the final chorus.

It's the skipper's lament, the bosun's farewell,
no longer to sail far and wide.
And the empty docks reminds us all,
how great was this city's pride.

Such a sad song did not seem to demand any rousing cheers and foot

stomping, but the others all told Josh how much they liked it.

"Aren't things supposed to be a lot better now, though? Estella was saying the city was even awarded the Capital of Culture back in 2008. Doesn't sound that bad to me. . . " said Nathaniel.

"Yes, things are certainly looking up, but they'll never see such a high level of marine life ever again, but nor will any major port, apparently", replied Gregor, who knew bits and bobs about Liverpool, mainly due to his love of the Beatles.

While the others smiled, Nathaniel was about to say that the Port of Liverpool never had been known for its exotic variety of sea creatures swimming in the Mersey, but he didn't. Mockery was not one of Nathaniel's traits, and he knew, as did the others, what Gregor was getting at.

The group of friends old and new chatted away quietly, and not one had managed a wink of sleep before. . .

"Right, you lot! Up up up! We've a job to do! Come on, you lazy so and sos! Get to it! Even you, Sydney Greenstreet! You 'orrible little man!"

'Sergeant Major Cornstone' had burst into the room, roaring at them all to get up and get ready. He had especially singled out Laszlo, referring to him as if he was a famous but particularly fat film star of the 1930s. As for him being 'a 'orrible little man!', this was contrived purely to feed his own sardonic sense of humour as well as reminding him of his old sergeant major. 'I've always wanted to say that!' he thought to himself with a smirk as he went to complete his self-styled reveille.

Now even Professor Cornstone had some semblance of decency and he wasn't going to burst into the ladies' dormitory as he had just done with the mens', but he was still going to let them know in no uncertain terms that it was time to go.

"You too, ladies! Uuugh! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

What exactly it was that the ladies could do, too, we can only guess, as the the door of the ladies' dormitory had flown open, and before the professor could elucidate further he was felled in a hail of swishes and sweeps of about half a dozen broomsticks. The ladies had heard the commotion next door and were certainly not going to put up with it and were ready – not just to go, but for the arrogant leader of their temporary troop.

The professor made a hasty retreat back to the main meeting room and waited for everyone to come through. It wasn't long before everyone was once again sitting around the large, oblong oak table.

"We can't go quite just yet, I've still to explain a few things. If this goes well, we'll be out of the enemy camp and on our way back to Hemlock Hall before you can say—"

"JACK ROBINSON!" came the cry from the hoi-polloi.

"Yes, well, I hope you are all in as happy a mood later on. Mr Beecham, here is a packet of sandwiches."

"I'm not hungry," said a mystified Josh, as Professor Cornstone threw the packet over to him.

"They're not for you, clot! They are for Bertie, he's going with you. To activate his newly installed X-Ray vision beam, feed him a sandwich whenever you think you may have found where either Miller or Grant are being held. The beam will work for about thirty seconds. That should be ample time to ascertain what's what. Also, if you think the light from the beam may give you away, feed him again to turn the beam off. Mart – er – Marina, stick closely to Mr Beecham, please, a lot depends on you. And it goes without saying you will need to keep a close eye on our strange friend here."

"Why say it, then?" asked Ernst.

"Shut up, Stannich. And if I can just say that I'm beginning to regret agreeing to this. If you want to back out now, Beecham, or you two, the rest of us will understand."

Josh smiled but shook his head and declined this magnanimous offer of an honourable retreat. Marina and Laszlo were also determined to proceed as planned.

The reluctant professor looked searchingly at each of them, sighed . . . and nodded. He addressed the gathering once more.

"As for the rest of us, all we can do is make sure we are ready for whatever happens. Please ensure all of you are armed with battle-wands. None of that cheap rubbish from the village apothecary. Is everyone ready?"

There were a variety of nods, yeses, and a no from Josh as he needed a wee, but a couple of minutes later they were all making the short journey to the Steed and Vine Public House.

48

Benny-the-Many

THE DECISION TAKEN by Professor Zenith that The League of Mordred's Northern Province should accommodate the warlocks had outraged Lieberman. He ushered everyone out of the lounge to the less salubrious public bar. He sat down on a chair, rubbed his temples, and mumbled something which would have been incomprehensible to Mike and Estella and maybe even to his own men. He sat there silently for a moment; then he heard a voice in his head.

"Yes, Lieberman, what is it now?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you again, Professor, but this really is intolerable. The warlocks may be allies, but they are also animals – filthy, stinking animals."

"You will not be sorry of this when they are beside you on the battlefield – will you not?"

"I know, Professor, but there has already been one fight. Tangeman is dead and Van Breemen is badly injured. Would you be so welcoming if they killed us all? I don't wish to challenge your decisions but what use is a dead army to you?"

"Hmmm – I take your point. However, Kerantzky and his men were due to leave with Miller and come out to join me, but I have to report – erm – yet another change of plan. I have decided to come to you, so I'm afraid you are stuck with them for a while longer. Can you not reach some sort of compromise?"

"But how, Professor? This is a public house, not a hotel or a rundown farm. There is precious little room for our own people, let alone the warlocks."

"But aren't you next to a farm? Surely there is a barn or outhouses there?"

"There is, but it is occupied."

"By whom?"

"I believe it is an elderly couple, the Nellis's, I think, but there are also the employees. How can we take over without arousing suspicion?"

"Kill them."

"What?! All of them?!"

"No, just the owners. Arrange for the employees to be made redundant."

"I'm not sure I – I – if that will be poss – er – a good – er—"

"Do it!"

"Y-yes, Professor, but what about— " But a shaken Lieberman sensed that his master had gone. "Dooley! Get in here man. I've got a job for you!"

Bill Dooley, a huge strapping man who kept himself at the peak of fitness, came into the lounge. Lieberman shut the door and proceeded to speak quietly to him.

Within an hour, final checks were being made on all the signs which had been hastily attached to the metal fencing, proclaiming: –

'THORNTON BUILDING COMPANY:
THESE PREMISES ARE CLOSED FOR MAJOR RENOVATIONS'

Lieberman gave instructions that all lights were to be switched off and for everyone to maintain total silence. Shortly after, an ambulance and a police car sped up the little lane by the side of the Steed and Vine. They swept past the pub and screeched to a halt outside Nellis's Farm.

Sometime later, two bodies wrapped head to toe in blankets were carried away on stretchers and away in the ambulance – which did not speed or jump red lights on its return journey.

The police began to make house to house enquiries in the area. They took one look at the fenced off pub and walked on. When Lieberman thought it safe to do so, he turned on some of the lights and gave the all clear sign. A few minutes later he was arguing with Kerantzky.

"No no no! You vill have to vait until morning! I 'az to arrange for ze verkforce to know zat zey 'ave been finished up, zen you can utilize ze premizez. Az much az I vont you lot out ov 'ere right now, I'm afraid I'm stuck viz you until tomorrow morning."

Kerantzky was having none of it.

"Ve go! Now! Never mind ze scumbag Pigzenfeederz. Zey show up – zen ve SSSSSCCHHKKKKKKK!" Kerantzky pulled his finger across his throat as he said this. Lieberman gulped and was about to try and argue Kerantzky down, but he was interrupted by his unseen master, who was heard by both men.

"Kerantzky! These are my orders you are countermanding! May I remind you I am in charge of this entire operation, you and your men merely happen to be useful for the moment – do you understand this?!"

Zenith was not banking on mere words to get his point across.

Kerantzky found himself surrounded by a swirling blue mist which seemed to consist of millions of glisteningly sharp tiny needles.

He was forced to his knees in agony as the mist circled around his now supplicant body, although there was no blood and the skin wasn't actually pierced, Kerantzky felt as if the ghostly needles were making thousands of random ultra-fine punctures as the mist carried them round and round his body. His clothing was no protection whatsoever; Kerantzky may as well have been naked. The pain, as bad as it was, was soon to get far worse. The deadly mist began to constrict and then expand rhythmically around Kerantzky, causing the needles to jab him repeatedly, sometimes rapidly, sometimes unbearably slowly, leaving him screaming out in pain.

He got the point.

The mist and the pain were both gone. Kerantzky struggled to his feet and slanked away to his men who were still in the bar. Lieberman mopped his sweating brow and asked Dooley to get him a drink.

As for Mike and Estella, they had been locked up in the pub's cellar shortly after their somewhat less than happy reunion. There were no chairs and they had had to sit against the wall, wedging themselves in between the different beer barrels and tubes. It was cold, uncomfortable and miserable.

In order to take their minds off their terrible predicament, they had talked of happier times, mainly involving holidays and short stays at the Chalmers family home in Southport. This is where Mike had first met Madeline's Aunt Estella, or Ezzie. Despite Mike being privy – although without wanting to be – to many grave secrets, Estella had made it clear to Mike that Madeline, as well as all of the younger members of Estella's extended family, did not know that she was a WFW agent and she wanted things to stay that way. This, Mike had been told, was especially important as Estella knew that on more than one occasion, Madeline had become suspicious after overhearing conversations and seeing a number of things that she should not have done.

The reminiscing was over and silent worry returned.

After a little while, however, sounds from dramatic scenes being played out upstairs ironically provided a distraction from their worrying situation, as well as from boredom, cold, hunger, and from numb backsides.

They heard the fight between both groups and guessed that someone had been killed, and they heard the row between Kerantzky and Lieberman.

And now they could even hear police sirens. Mike, as the high pitched swirling alarm became louder and louder, was imagining flashing blue lights lighting up the lounge of the pub, followed by a scrambling of bodies, and then shouts through megaphones of, 'This is the Police! Stay where you are!', and of course he hoped that they were both going to be rescued. Sady, there were no megaphones, the sirens were silenced and relative quiet returned. A still hopeful Mike looked to the door of the cellar, but of course this was in vain; the door was not going to be suddenly bashed in by a burly British bobby while a worried Jack Frost or Morse type looked on.

"Too many cop shows, Mike," suddenly said Estella, with a wry smile.

"Eh?"

"Oh, nothing, just messing," replied Estella.

"I wonder what the warlocks' camp in Romania is like?" asked Mike, not dwelling further on this strange interlude.

"Don't even think about it, Mike, with a little luck, we'll never know."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Do you know what, I'm starving! You would think they would at least feed us."

At that instant, Dooley came in, strangely smiling at them. He passed Estella a beer tray on which was crammed two plates of hotpot with red cabbage, a pot of tea, milk, sugar, two plastic cups and two sets of plastic cutlery. His smile gave way to a horrible grimace as he heard someone shouting him.

"Dooley! May I remind you that I am the real leader of the Northern Province and not Lieberman! Hurry, man! I want my dinner!"

It was a small, fat, but otherwise non-descript man called Fred Alty. His

pride had been badly dented by having his power usurped by Lieberman, who, upon Zenith's orders, was put in charge temporarily. This was on the basis of Lieberman knowing the bigger picture. What was even more disappointing to Alty was that he had only been promoted into the position of Province Leader very recently. Upon his eventual return to HQ, the former leader Johann Hentz had been summoned to a meeting by his master. He went into Zenith's office – but never came out again.

Dooley hurried off to fetch his umbridged master his evening meal.

"Come on, Mike, eat up, you never know if it's our last – er – when we'll get another meal," said Estella.

Mike knew full well what Estella had been going to say, but didn't mention it.

"Yeah, you're right. Looks good 'n' all."

Wimpole's Magic Caravan, once again invisible, landed quietly in the farmer's field next to the Steed and Vine. Their task had been further complicated by the presence of two policemen who had been left on duty to guard the murder scene, and there was police tape all around the farmhouse. This gave the rescue party a few more things to worry about as they attempted to get from the field and next door into the pub, unseen.

"I don't know what's gone on here, but we'll have to get past them somehow," said Josh.

"Knowing these farm lads, there's probably been a big fight with scythes and dislodged cutters from a combine harvester. Oh, and maybe seven or eight cartridges from a shotgun fired by a mentally deranged boy with a checked shirt, braces, black teeth and a gammy leg, shouting, 'I got him, Pa!' – there's always one of them," said the gruesome and the ridiculously inaccurate and unfair Professor Cornstone. "But you are right, we can't let it alter our plans."

The rest of the passengers all pulled faces at such a bloodthirsty scenario.

Professor Cornstone continued unabashed. "I think it's time. Are you four ready?"

There were three yeses and a completely blank stare from the red-eyed Bertie the Jukebox.

The passenger door was opened as quietly as possible. The trouble was it had recently developed a problem of shutting with a bang. After Josh and his three compadres had eased themselves down onto the damp grass, the door suddenly closed to with a clearly audible 'Schkedumff!'

"Who's there?" shouted one of the policemen. "Here, Tom, you stay here. I'm havin' a butcher's."

"OK, Jim," replied Tom.

Josh, thankful that the moon was clouded over and that there were no street lights to give them away, stood stock-still as did the others. He had an idea which he thought was worth a try. He crouched down, picked up a stone and threw it at a hedge to the side of the field. Luckily for Josh it hit an old

discarded iron trough. There was a frantic fluttering of wings as a partridge shot up into the air and flew away.

Jim went over to check the hedge.

"Come back, Jim! It's just the birds!" said Tom.

"What?! Birds that can bang on a drum?! Don't be daft!" replied Jim.

"It's 'cause it's night-time. Gives me the creeps it does, ya 'ear all sorts of things. Come on back 'ere and forget it."

"Yeah, I suppose ya right."

The two policemen soon resumed their mind-numbing guarding of the crime scene and Josh decided it was now or never. While hoping that the moon remained obscured by cloud to aid the clandestine operation, he nudged the others to slowly move with him as quietly as possible. They now had to get to the gate at the side of the field and up the lane. Josh thought they had made it without being seen, but the dog from the farm, which had previously been asleep when Mike and his warlock captors had passed by, was now wide awake. He also happened to be in a very bad mood.

He did not know where his owners had been taken to and he was also hungry. The dog stopped right in front of them and barked, snarled and drooled. The dog ran around them, stopped and snarled, and ran around them again. The dog kept this up and as he completed each full circle he edged a little nearer, as if he was slowly coming round to the fact that intruders and meals do not necessarily have to be separate entities.

Josh had to think quickly. Just like in the Cryogenic Facility in Aberystwyth University, he could again perform an Invisibility spell, but these required far more magic energy than any other type of spell, possibly leaving his wand useless for any prolonged skirmishes with the enemy. And they wouldn't stay invisible for long and nor could the others help: Marina's wand needed to be at full power for what she needed to do, and unfortunately Laszlo's magic skills were very poor. And unless the music of Elvis Presley or McFly could help British policemen totally ignore a group of wizards who just happened to have appeared in a farmer's field in this quiet Merseyside backwater, then nor would Bertie be of any help at all.

Josh sighed, drew a circle around all of them with his wand and quietly uttered the incantation, '*Invisio Quadrilatium Instanto*'. The gang of four were now invisible – to most living things. . .

But Josh then groaned. The dog still barked – still ran around in circles – it could still see them. "Oh, well, the old tales must be true . . . but it's still something," lamented and sighed Josh.

By this time, the policemen had been disturbed from their talk of football and beer to break the mind-numbing boredom. They ran over towards the gate and could see this huge Alsatian, barking at nothing in particular and running round and around in circles. That was until it caught sight of them. Mincemeat was a clever dog. He knew straightaway that these two men in blue had been around at the time his owners had been taken away, by other men in blue. Whether these were the same two did not matter a jot, they

were to blame and that was that – plus, he was still hungry.

"Zero Oscar Fourteen – come in, please," said the voice, emanating from the police radio which had been carelessly dropped on the floor. "I repeat. Zero Oscar Fourteen – come in, please." There was no reply. The two-man team with the radio handle, Zero Oscar Fourteen, were now trying to outrun a lean, fit, aggrieved and hungry Alsatian.

Josh again nudged his accomplices, and they swept out of the gate and made the short walk to the Steed and Vine. They cut a hole in the fence big enough to crawl through, sneaked around the car park and went down the side passageway towards the bowling green. Josh knew of the rear entrance – a set of French windows which opened directly on to the green, and hoped that this would be their best bet.

It wasn't.

They peered in through the window and could see a packed lounge with a large number of The League of Mordred enjoying free beer and food. Josh thought for a moment. Although they were still invisible he knew it still wasn't worth the risk, and so guided them all back along the passage.

About half way along was the side door. This wasn't normally used by patrons but by staff emptying rubbish and collecting the glasses from the bowling team's club hut.

Josh whispered, "Whatever way we go in, there will still be a risk of being caught despite being invisible, but it's a chance we will have to take. Are you still with me?"

Marina and Laszlo nodded while Bertie just stared blankly ahead. Josh gave a nudge and opened the door very slowly and very carefully. They found themselves in the hallway. This had heavily panelled, highly polished walls, and it connected both the lounge and the bar as it ran from the main entrance to the rear of the pub. They were careful not to tread on each other's toes or bang into anything, as this would be a sure giveaway.

Josh stopped for a moment, thinking of where to look first. And then catastrophe: Laszlo had been holding his nose and his hand to his mouth for quite a while without any of the others realising it, but he could not hold on any longer. Josh eventually noticed and reacted quickly. In a flash he pulled on the handle of a nearby cleaning closet; it opened and Josh quickly pushed them all in and closed the door behind them.

"AAAARRRRCHHHOOOO!" sneezed poor Laszlo.

But this was just as Lieberman walked past. Josh had seen him a split-second before he had closed the door, but had Lieberman heard them?

Lieberman stopped right by the closet, and then the strangest thing happened. Just as a couple of men came from the lounge to investigate the noise, Lieberman also sneezed, very loudly. His colleagues saw him, grinned, and Lieberman waved them back in to continue their relaxation and demanding that someone sing a song.

Josh whispered to his little friend, "Laszlo! Why didn't you say you had a cold?! You could easily have given us away!"

"It is not a cold, Mr Beecham, I am allergic to certain things. As soon as I smelled furniture polish, it made me sneeze. And I think that Lieberman fellow must be allergic, too. We were very, very lucky there."

"Yes, hmmm – very lucky indeed. Right, let me think for a moment . . . OK, now, where are Estella and Mike likely to be – Marina, Laszlo?"

"The attic?" suggested Laszlo. "Most people don't think of pubs of having attics, so maybe there?"

"No, I zink ze zellar iz bezt," said Marina. "I 'ave verked in many bars'z. I zink ze zellar iz more zuitibal az it iz more zecure."

"Both sound good to me, but then again, they may not even be together, but . . . sorry, Laszlo, ladies first, eh? The cellar it is, we'll try there first," decided Josh.

The door was opened and left slightly ajar. The gap was just wide enough to see through and to check if it was safe enough to leave.

The League of Mordred, after considerable to-ings and fro-ings from some of their number, had all eventually settled in the lounge. It had been diplomatically put to the warlocks that they may prefer to remain in the public bar, which seemed to be more to their liking.

Josh gave the signal to move. He carefully opened the door of the cupboard a little more, and they all edged out into the passageway.

At exactly the same time, who should walk out of the bar but Kerantzky and three of his cohorts, arms around each other's shoulders, singing (if it could be called that), an old drinking song from home. Josh was reasonably confident that they would not be noticed as the Invisibility spell still had at least a little time to run, but he had not had a chance to shut the door. Would they notice this? Beads of sweat trickled down his temples.

The problem with a heightened sense of fear in a situation like this, is that it is difficult to be objective. The truth is, a warlock who has had far too much to drink and is singing his rotten heart out about some chiselled out niche in a rock he calls home, is not going to notice a cupboard door being open when it shouldn't be, nor would he care if he had. The warlocks simply staggered on to a hostile reception in the lounge.

Josh knew they had to get behind a bar counter to reach the cellar, from either the lounge or the public bar. He chose the latter.

They edged over to the door and then moved slightly in to the bar. There was a side hatch immediately in front of them, but a drunken warlock was standing there, staggering and reeling while trying to light a cigarette.

Josh noticed a stag's head mounted on the wall, just to the left of the bar counter. He pondered on this for a moment and then came up with a most ridiculous idea, but one which he thought might just work.

Although he was a real wizard, he had as a child delighted in such stage tricks as ventriloquism, entertaining his grandfather and the rest of the family by pretending to make a toy moose talk. Here was his chance to do it again, but this time for far more than just pocket money and ruffled hair. Josh decided to put on a deep American accent. He didn't know why, really,

but he seemed to remember most talking moosii on kids' films usually did so.

"Hey, Pardner! Need a light? Over here! It's me, Billy the Moose. Here!"

The warlock looked around and saw that the Moose had a lit match attached to an antler. He walked over to Billy the Moose, hicupping and burping as he did so.

"Za–za–zat iz-zzz-zzo kind ov-ov you, zanken you." He leaned over to get a light, but the lit match was slowly descending to the floor. "Z–z–zzat izz–z-z zztrangze." He followed the match right down to the floor but then cracked his head hard on the wall. The considerable impact had been brought about more by the application of Josh's right boot to the drunken warlock's backside than it being purely due to the poor fellow's unsteadiness. He slid slowly down the wall to the floor and was very soon prostrate and unconscious.

As much as the rescue party were relieved to get this far, they now had the further worry of being fully visible again to one and all. Timing was crucial. Josh and his friends ducked down, quickly crawled over the still unconscious warlock and through the space underneath the hatch. Luckily for the friends they were not seen as they carefully lifted up the small square wooden trap door at the other end of the bar and commenced climbing down the short but steep set of stairs.

From up in the bar came sudden jeers of derision from some of the warlocks. They had noticed that their fellow drunken reveller had collapsed and that the seat of his pants was smouldering as he snored away, courtesy of the discarded but still burning match. The four friends stopped for a moment. The jeers faded away, no-one came scampering down the steps after them – they were still safe.

The cellar was not immediately below the bar but was right underneath the centre of the pub. It was reached by walking along a narrow low-ceilinged connecting passageway. It was a struggle for anyone much above average height and build, but was still just about manageable by walking in single file – and ducking if need be, which did indeed apply to Josh.

After a few feet there was a small door on the left. This was the pub's main cellar where the barrels were kept. Each barrel had tubes attached which ran up and through the ceiling, and were connected to the beer taps in the lounges and bars above.

"Well, Bertie my friend – hungry?" Bertie said nothing. Josh offered him one of the sandwiches which he gulped down in one go. Josh was nearly blinded as Bertie was still facing him wanting more food, but with his eyes giving out a powerful magic X-Ray beam. "That way, Hungry Horace, that way!" said Josh, who gently twisted Bertie's neck so he faced the right way.

After rubbing his eyes, Josh was able to glance at the door, and quite amazingly it was as if it wasn't even there. He could see both Mike and Estella, sitting against the wall, talking away.

"Well done, Bertie! You got it in one! Brilliant!" Josh then fed Bertie his organic off switch.

As Laszlo was nearest to the door he tried the handle; the door was locked. Josh placed his battle-wand on the door handle, furrowed his brow, quietly uttered the incantation – and the handle just disappeared. He was then able to just push the door wide open.

Upon hearing someone outside, the two hostages had been looking up expecting one or more of their captors, but they were in for a big surprise.

"Josh! Marina, Laszlo! – Bertie?!" shouted a relieved and surprised Mike.

"Hello, hello, about time too!" said a beaming Estella.

Josh was alarmed at the racket.

"Ssshhh, the pair of you. Listen, we have got to be quick. I'm awfully sorry to you both, especially to you, Estella, but Marina needs quite a few strands of hair from you both. OK?"

"If it gets me out of this place, you can have the lot!" said Estella. "And mine!" agreed Mike.

Marina quickly cut a substantial amount of hair from both of them.

"Listen, pleeze – ve are doing ze Beeny-ze-Meeny spell – yez? Ven I 'ave done ze magick, zer vill be many ov you, boze all over ze place."

Mike and Estella both just nodded, but they had not got a clue as to what Marina was talking about.

Marina placed the hair in two clumps on top of one of the beer barrels. She held out her wand, a perfectly ordinary wand which she had hidden from Professor Cornstone.

She aimed the wand at the top of the barrel and uttered the incantation:

'MULITPERSONAEUM FOLLICOLORIUM PERIPATATICUS NOMADOSIUM!'

There was a blinding flash at which everyone had to cover their eyes.

"Zorry, shud 'ave sed!" apologised Marina.

When they all opened their eyes again they did not really know what to expect, but what they did see – was something they most certainly did not expect – nothing!

Josh looked worried. "Marina, has this spell worked?"

Marina smiled. "Just vait. Yez? 'Ave pazienz, pleeze."

They all stood there in silence, and waited – and waited – and waited. Josh could not take any more.

"Marina, I really thi—"

"THE MILLER BOY HAS ESCAPED! LOOK! HE'S IN THE CAR PARK!"

Josh had been interrupted by a shout from one of The League of Mordred who had been sitting in the lounge. They all listened intently to what followed.

"QUICK! AFTER HIM!"

The sound of absolute uproar and chaos followed. There was another shout, this time concerning Estella.

"I'VE JUST SEEN GRANT! SHE'S ALREADY ON THE MAIN ROAD!"

The entire company bar one (the one being the cook who was at a crucial

stage in the cooking of a stargazy pie), of The League of Mordred, left their hideout and ran out after our two bogus escapees. By the time they had reached the car park there was no sign of either Mike or Estella.

Fred Alty, realising that Lieberman had been reticent in the issuing of commands, saw this as his chance to reaffirm his authority. He proceeded to split the large mob gathered in the car park into two groups.

"You lot! Grant can only be a few yards away, get after her! The rest of you, follow me!"

The first posse had to struggle to push back a section of the metal fencing so they could commence their pursuit of Estella.

With no Mike in the car park after all, Alty and the rest ran around to the side of the pub, thinking he had doubled back and was going to make a break for it over the open fields. Just as they reached the farmer's field next door, there was another shout from an upstairs window in the pub, it was the cook.

"No no no! He's gone the other way! I can see him! He's heading towards the cemetery! Head for the cemetery! Blimey, me pie's burning."

Fred and his men nearly ended up in a heap on the floor with some turning straightaway and others still running on. They ran back around to the car park, on and out of the far exit, and further along the lane towards the cemetery which bordered the Steed and Vine.

They reached the edge of the road and were amazed to find that in the back seat of a car being driven past them in the opposite direction, were Estella and Mike, just sitting there, staring into space.

"The cheeky devils! Right, you lot! Into the lorry! Quick!"

Back they went again, this time to pile into one of their cover props – a one-ton, open backed builder's lorry. Within a minute, Fred and his cohorts were speeding along Amber Lane, trying to catch up with the getaway car.

The only thing is, they had to stop at traffic lights which they would have jumped if it were not for a bus in front and a stream of vehicles turning into Amber Lane. As Fred drummed impatiently with his fingers on the steering wheel, he saw Mike walking back down Amber Lane, strolling along without a care in the world. He then spotted Estella going down a side road. Fred manoeuvred the lorry out of the queue, but promptly smashed right into the rear of the bus. By the time he had backed up and turned off down the side road, Estella had disappeared.

Eddy Kavanagh, one of Zenith's evil brethren, could see along the lane from the open back of the lorry.

"They've doubled back down the lane, both of 'em! Head back to the pub!"

Fred reversed his lorry at speed but was soon in more trouble. He couldn't manage to keep it straight and smashed right into a tree. The occupants in the back all banged heads, and Eddy even fell out. In the front, Fred and his passengers had also banged their heads, right on the dashboard. As Fred mopped his bleeding forehead with his handkerchief, he was amazed to find Mike and Estella zooming past them on powerful motorbikes.

Fred tried the engine expecting the worst, but he got lucky. The lorry again roared into life, Eddy climbed back up, and they were soon in pursuit of the Honzuke Thousands. Fred saw the bikes turn right and so he followed suit, but the bikes roared on and out of sight. As he passed the Steed and Vine, he looked up to see Mike looking out of an upstairs window, just staring at him, while Estella was down below just leaning against the doorway of the pub.

"So it's fun and games they want! We'll soon see about that!"

Fred made a sharp turn at speed, which again saw a disgruntled Eddy Kavanagh fall out onto Amber Lane. He got up and shook his fists at his maniac boss.

As the lorry screeched to a halt in the car park, the gang who had been chasing Estella arrived back, out of breath. As Fred had expected, Estella was no longer in the doorway, and one quick glance up confirmed that Mike was no longer at the window.

"Sorry, boss, lost 'em," said another League Member, Steve Quirk.

Fred Alty addressed his exhausted and confused troops. "Listen up, you lot! It's my guess something big is going down and—"

"The Titanic?" joked Quirk.

"Shut up, Quirk. I think our two friends have somehow been told to create a disturbance, even though they know they haven't a chance of escaping. That is why they are back here. I want everyone to search every possible place in the pub: every nook and cranny, cupboard, wardrobe . . . the works. I'll start with the obvious, the cellar. They're probably sitting there, grinning away, thinking how clever they've been. Cousins and Hewitson, you're with me. Let's get to it!"

"Hang on a mo, boss. Why just us? What about the warlocks?" asked O'Shaughnessy, another of the pursuers. Fred Alty put his hand to his ear and strained as if listening for something.

"Hear anything?"

"No, boss. Why?"

"Because our drunken friends have all had enough and are out of it, I'd say for a good few hours going by how much they've put away. We're on our own, never mind the cavemen. Now move!"

The League of Mordred marched back into the Steed and Vine to root out the troublesome two.

It was at this stage of the proceedings that the real power and subtlety of the Benny-the-Many spell showed itself. What had transpired so far was just for openers, setting the scene of confusion. Such a spell is at its very best when working in close, tight situations. If there was a corner to go round, a cupboard to go into, a passageway to walk along or a room to go into or leave, this is where a multitude of Bennys would be found.

No sooner had the search commenced than there came a shout.

"There he is! Get him!" Two of the League ran from the bar into the lounge. No Mike.

"There she is!" No Estella. "No – there!"

Estella even walked up the stairs only to come out of the cupboard underneath a second later.

Mike even managed to be chased at exactly the same time by three different groups: around the kitchen, in the bathroom upstairs, and right around the bowling green several times at high-speed, just like a sketch from the Benny Hill show.

The League of Mordred were getting nowhere.

After telling his cohorts to check the basement store rooms, Fred Alty ran down to the cellar, confident that the search would soon be at an end. This was based on a hopeful thought that the two prisoners, knowing they couldn't really escape for real or for long, had simply decided to cause confusion and chaos for their captors for an hour or so, before laughing all the way back to the cellar. He burst in through the door. No. His hopes were dashed – they really had gone! In his fury, he banged repeatedly on the top of one of the beer barrels – until the lid came off and soaked him in best bitter.

Meanwhile, Lieberman had taken himself off to his room. He had a migraine. As he lay there, a familiar but currently unwelcome voice spoke in his mind.

"Lieberman! You fool! You stupid fool! You are being tricked!"

"I don't understand, Professor! What are you talking about?"

"After the scum sent you supposedly to stay out of the way, I gave you authority over that moron, Alty, because I believed you could lead the men of my Northern Province and mould them to follow me to the end. Instead, I have a local commander who doesn't even know what is happening! Our enemies have performed a Multipersonae spell, or you may know it as a Benny-the-Many spell. Unless you act now, Miller and Grant will escape! Just do the job you have been appointed to do and for which you are exceptionally well paid!"

"Y-ye-yes, Professor Zenith, at once."

"And Lieberman? I'm sure I have no need to remind you of the consequences, should you fail?"

"N-no, Professor."

A little earlier, after hearing the shouts and yells of the ensuing chaos, and of course before Fred had stormed the room to no avail, the prisoners and their rescuers were still huddled in the cellar.

"Marina, how long does this spell last?" asked Josh.

"It iz difficult to be zertin, but I zink if ve say ve 'az a 'our, zat shud do itz."

"An hour? Hmmm – difficult, but we'll have to try. Mike, Estella, are you OK to go? Not hurt in any way?"

"Apart from an aching bonce, I'm fine," replied Mike.

"A little cold and sore but otherwise fine," added Estella.

Josh again furrowed his brow and thought for a few moments.

"Our problem is, although they are chasing shadows for the moment, we

on the other hand are the real thing. There is a chance that we may still be spotted. Right then, Marina, I assume that the spell builds up, creating more and more replicants?"

Marina just gave a quizzical look while Estella smiled and said, "Replicants, Josh? Too many Sci-Fi films! What he means, Marina – is – will more and more Bennys appear as time goes on?"

"Oh, o' – zorry, yez – for a vile, anyvay. I zink ze maximum impact ov ze spell iz after about ze tventy minitz time."

"Can we recast the same spell giving us even more time?" asked Josh.

Marina just shook her head. It was commonly known that at least some intricate spells cannot be cast and recast within a short time frame.

"OK, no matter. Twenty minutes until it's peaked, leaving us forty minutes or so to ensure our escape, hmmm – not that long, we'll have to take our chances right now. Ready?"

Everyone nodded and Josh led the way back out. They stopped at the bottom of the steps leading up to the bar.

"Wait here, I'll check to see if it's safe."

Josh climbed the steps and crouched as he stepped back up into the bar. He then carefully peered up and over the hatch of the bar counter. The first stage of their escape was going to be a bit easier than he had thought. All of the warlocks were lying all over the public bar, on the floor, across the tables and sprawled over seats. They were all out cold due to their drunken excesses.

Josh guided the others up and out. He stopped at the doorway, but straightaway two of the League appeared and saw them. No sooner did they open their mouths to yell for help, than they fell down dead in the passageway. Josh looked down at his battle-wand. He had just been about to use it – he had indeed pointed it – but he was convinced he had not released a death-bolt. 'I'll have to get that seen to,' thought Josh, 'can't have the flippin' thing going off willy-nilly.'

Loud shouts then shook him from his musing.

"You twelve! Zer iz Miller on ze bowlingz field – after 'im! Ze uzzers, go after Grant. Up a ze stairz! Move!" It was Lieberman.

This was the opportunity Josh had been waiting for. "Go!"

They ran out of the front entrance and around the car park and back out of the hastily reopened gate in the fencing. They reached the lane and ran down the side of the bowling green. They were protected by the hedging, a little, but still had to duck down low as they went past the chaotic scenes still being played out on the other side of the hedge.

Although they all knew they were not quite free and clear, the friends all breathed sighs of relief at getting this far.

With the pub behind them and their friends on the caravan only yards away, the escapees relaxed a little more, but their success so far had lulled them into a false sense of security.

Laszlo had yet again been holding his nose, but it was to no avail, this time

he sneezed even louder. This was at exactly the same time as Fred Alty ran around the side of the pub, chasing Estella, or so he thought.

By the time Fred Alty had turned the corner, Estella had already disappeared, but he had heard the sneeze. Fred, after an even worse ear-chewing from his boss than Leiberman had had, looked along the lane to see the six-strong Irregulars, which of course included the real Mike and the genuine Estella.

Fred lifted his battle-wand – and dropped down dead.

Josh had once more raised his own battle-wand in anger, but was again sure, or at least he thought he was sure, that he had not actually fired it.

'That's it! This thing is really up the spout!'

He ushered his wards along the lane until he reached the hedge which separated the bowling green from the farm. Meanwhile, the frantic runaround Mike was still leading The League of Mordred a merry dance, and Estella continued to keep them busy, both upstairs and downstairs.

"What happened this time?!" Josh asked Laszlo.

"I'm sorry, Mr Beecham, but now I really am getting a cold. It's this night air, you know."

"Yes, there's an awful lot of it about – at night," joked Josh. "That's OK, we're still alive, and that's all that matters."

"That was a quick reaction back there, Josh, we were nearly all goners," said Estella.

"Yeah! Brill!" agreed Mike.

"Whoa there, young fella! Don't make light of death. Even bad guys have mums and sons, Mike – never, ever, ever, ever forget that. Kill – only when it's absolutely necessary – and even then – remember it is still an evil."

Mike was ashamed. "Sorry."

"Josh the philosopher, eh! I'm proud to call you my friend. Thank you."

Estella smiled and gave Josh a light peck on the cheek. Marina, equally thankful, gave him a big smacker on the lips. Laszlo humphed.

The others couldn't see it but Josh was blushing, and not just at Marina's smacker, but because he knew, 'though the others did not, he had not actually been the little posse's saviour moments ago. What Josh could definitely see, was Mike with his eyes closed, head craning forward, puckering his lips and making kissy noises.

"Any more of that, m'lad, and I'll give you back to them!"

To restrained laughter the six made the short walk through the gate and over to where the second wave, which had not been needed so far, was waiting.

Out of nowhere a door opened and the rescuers and the rescued climbed on board the caravan.

Almost immediately, Josh and Professor Cornstone were both contacted by Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph. They had to gesture for the cheering incumbents to pipe down and to allow Mike Miller and Estella Grant to actually breathe.

"Hello, Josh, marvellous performance, marvellous! Thank your little posse for me, well done. And hello, Edwin, my heartiest congratulations on a job well done! Please pass my deepest thanks on to all the others for playing their part in a good team effort. However – I'm afraid you are not quite finished. It would appear that our sneaky friend Lieberman – er – knows too much, as does his rather large assistant. I'm afraid I have to ask you both to go back and – er – kidnap both of them. I don't want either of them killed or harmed, just kidnapped and brought to me. Understood?"

"Yes, Headmaster, but why bother? Why don't we just kill them?" asked an astounded but never the less cold-blooded Professor Cornstone, while Josh was just too confused about it all to formulate anything worthwhile.

"I think you should listen to Josh the Philosopher, don't you?' retorted Professor Winch. "Remain invisible and make your plans in the field, as it were. Do you get it? In the field? Oh never mind! Seriously, gentlemen, this is of the utmost importance. I will contact you again later to see how you have fared. Goodbye for now."

The rest of the passengers unaware of the proposed delay, just chatted away freely as if it was nothing but a Sunday School outing.

Josh and Edwin stared at each other in disbelief.

49

The Friendly Hostages

WIMPOLE'S MAGIC CARAVAN remained invisible and motionless. It was not likely to be going anywhere for a while.

As for the Benny-the-Many spell, this was rapidly speeding to a glorious conclusion in and around the Steed and Vine – and even further afield. It had been so successful that Lieberman had even received a call from a shelf-stacking League member working undercover in Kwikbury's supermarket in Crosby Village. The caller had said that Mike Miller was in the store, buying enough provisions for a year. After he had thanked his minion, Lieberman ended the call, smiled to himself, and immediately despatched seven more of his men to investigate.

The finale was more comical than Marina could ever have possibly imagined when casting the spell. This was mainly due to each version of Mike and Estella just stopping dead in their tracks, all at exactly the same time. Thinking it was all over, each pursuer closed in, only for each replicant to promptly disappear.

Quirk thought he had Mike trapped in the kitchen; he went to grab him but instead found himself folding his arms and falling over. To add insult to injury, as he fell he careered into the oven and ended up wearing a pan of potatoes. Out on the bowling green, the agreed strategy was for seven of The League of Mordred to surround Mike and close in; these all ended up sticking their fingers into the eyes of their opposite numbers, as far as that could go, anyway. The upshot here was that one poor chap had eight fingers and two thumbs – stuck in each eye.

One version of Estella was balanced precariously on a ledge outside of an upper window – this resulted in O'Shaughnessy executing a perfect high dive from off the same ledge, but it was just a pity that there was no water in the car park, only tarmac – and cars. He bounced off a bonnet, hit the ground with a mighty thud, and screamed for help as he now had a broken leg and a badly gashed head.

It was becoming clearer by the second that they had been duped, and very soon all of The League of Mordred had reassembled in the lounge where they were to be addressed by Lieberman.

"Gentlemen, ve 'ave been tricked. Zeez ver not ze 'ostagez but magick copiez to confuze us all zo ze Miller boy and ze vumman can escape. I 'ave checked in ze zellar and zey are boze gone. I also 'ave to tell you zat zey 'ave killed Fred. I am zo zorry, but ziss vill not stop ze inevitable, I promise you, ve vill still vin in ze end."

"But how?" asked a cynical Rimmer. "They've got the Miller scum back,

how can we win?"

"Shut up, Rimmer. Zo pleeze, I 'ave zumzing to do right now, but all ov you vait 'ere. I vill be back soon to tell you vot ve do next."

Lieberman went upstairs, sat on a chair, and once more furrowed his brow and spoke quietly in a strange, ancient tongue.

Professor Gemini Zenith spoke back to Lieberman, in his mind.

"Yes, I thought you would be contacting me. Miller and Grant have escaped after all, haven't they? You imbecile! Where is Alty? Maybe I should have left him in charge. . . ?"

"He is dead, Professor. Killed."

"Yes! I know that! But are you sure it was the enemy? My senses tell me otherwise."

"Yes, Professor! Whatever are you suggesting?!"

The razor sharp constricting blue mist returned; seconds later Lieberman was in unbelievable agony. "Are you still so certain now, my loyal servant?!"

"AAaaaarrrgghhh! Yes! Yes! Y-yes, Professor, I am totally certain, even if you kill me now this will still be the truth!"

The blue mist intensified for a second, but then vanished.

"Do not be so clumsy next time, Lieberman, this is your last chance. Do not contact me again. I now have to change my plans once more because of your incompetence. I will contact you when the time is right."

"I will not let you down, Professor, thank you."

Zenith was gone. Lieberman remained seated, rubbing his still tingling shoulders and arms. A few moments later. . .

"Yes, yes, I'm here. Uhu – um – it depends on what you mean by successful . . . yes, yes, that is so, rest easy on that . . . but there are other matters. Yes – uhum – yes. I am not too sure if . . . well – if that is what you wish . . . yes, yes I will . . . goodbye for now."

Lieberman stood up and walked over and opened the door. "Dooley! Here man! Right now!"

Back on board Wimpole's Magic Caravan, Josh Beecham and Edwin Cornstone were seated away from the others, trading whispered ideas for their task in hand.

Ezekiel, however, was unusually quiet. He was finding it very difficult to cope, not only with both his estranged cousin and former uncle, but with such esprit-de-corp and camaraderie. This was after an enforced absence of many years from both the military – and the more clandestine life of the secret agent.

Everyone else was sitting around discussing this and that, and much to our eastern European friends' amusement, the bevy of old dears from the rainy British Isles discussed the weather in great detail.

However, a certain two were not happy – they were not happy at all.

"Did he say why we can't go?" asked Fred Marsh.

"Did 'e 'eck as like! All's 'e said wuz, we ain' goin' nowhere until 'e,

(pointing to Professor Cornstone), says we can. Flippin' cheek! My Mrs ain' gonna be chuffed at all. It's flippin' toad in the 'ole night!" replied Barry Wimpole.

"I thought you said you don't like toad in the hole?"

"I don't. Can't stand the stuff, but me Mrs loves it."

"Right," said Fred.

The rest of the males in this newly formed irregular outfit were sitting around talking of the respective merits of Romanian and British beer. Estella, who had been sitting amongst them, tutted and moved to the only table currently unoccupied and began to play patience.

Professor Cornstone and Josh Beecham both stood up in readiness to once more leave the caravan. The convivial chatter and the mutterings and grumblings of the rest of the gathering ceased in an instant. Professor Cornstone addressed his fellow Irregulars:

"Listen up, everyone. Professor Winch has given Beecham and I an unexpected task. We have to go into the Steed and Vine to try and capture our old friend Lieberman and his sidekick, Dooley. This is going to be difficult and we may not even succeed. If this is the case then I don't expect we'll make it back, either of us, and this is what you must do:

"Gregor? As you know, Professor Winch made you Second-in-Command. I hope you don't mind my saying but that's meaningless at the minute, but if it becomes necessary, choose a partner and try and complete the task. Don't waste time looking for us, if it comes to this – there will be no point – we'll be dead. Any questions?"

The rest of the passengers on board the magic caravan were just too shocked to say anything at all.

"That's it, then. Hopefully we'll be successful and we'll see you all again soon."

Josh said his goodbyes to all. He singled out Mike and gave him a cheery wink. Professor Cornstone signalled to Fred, the door was soon opened, and they both stepped from the caravan and down onto the damp grass. As they stole away, the door closed behind them. 'Schkedumff!" Tuts and groans issued forth, from both inside the caravan and from the two potential kidnappers, but on they went.

There was no dog to hinder them on this occasion and they managed to get from the farm to the pub quite quickly. They stopped for a moment against the sidewall.

"Don't forget, Beecham, I'll zap Lieberman, you zap Dooley, but stun spells only."

Josh sighed. He had just spent at least an hour going over and over much the same thing.

They moved slowly along to the end of the wall. Here they stopped to take stock and to trade whispers, the result of which saw the Professor suddenly crouch down while Josh remained upright.

With a slight nod from Josh, both men rather comically peered around the

corner so as to reconnoitre the front entrance and car park. No-one seemed to be about, so they edged right around and commenced sidling along the front wall, but as the entrance porch came in to view, Josh and the professor were stunned to find Lieberman and Dooley, just standing in the porchway as casual as you like, talking quietly and smoking.

A moment later, Professor Cornstone shook himself and his compadre out of their state of shock.

"NOW!"

Both men raised their battle-wands, but as they looked straight ahead and were ready to fire, they were amazed to see both Anton Lieberman and Bill Dooley waving white handkerchiefs in their direction. This stopped them in their tracks and both lowered their wands.

Lieberman looked at Dooley; after a slight pause they both walked over to our two confused guerrillas.

"Ve are ready to go viz you, but ve vill 'ave to do zo qvickly," said Lieberman.

Neither Professor Cornstone nor Josh Beecham could quite believe it – Anton Lieberman was volunteering to be taken into custody. To some, in truth just a precious few, he was still a true patriot of his country and a solid defender of all that is good. But to most people who knew him or had heard of him, whether military or civilian, he was for sure the very worst kind of enemy decent God-fearing people could ever have– a traitor. Sadly for Anton Lieberman, the two Hemlock Hall men solidly subscribed to the latter school of thought.

There was also the matter of Bill Dooley. He had once been on the side of good, and both Josh and Edwin had seen him in action in skirmishes with The League of Mordred and many other enemies years before. He was like Bruce Lee, James Bond and Merlin all rolled into one. He could dodge barrages of death-bolts with huge leaps and jumps and rolls, while firing off four battle-wands, two in each hand, all at the same time.

Although neither of the Irregulars relished a fight with him, it has to be said that neither shirked from the possibility of doing so. It was a great mystery to all as to why he had crossed over.

Dooley spoke.

"Listen 'ere, Cornstone, Beecham . . . if yer don' wanna see us all killed, then I suggest ya take us ter wherever it is yev 'idden yer means of escape, 'n' more importantly, I fink we should do it now."

"Very well, follow me," said the professor. One thing neither Josh nor Professor Cornstone were going to do was to engage six feet nine inches worth of pure fighting machine with a seventy-two inch chest, in meaningless banter.

What none of the four men saw was Kerantzky, watching from the shadows of the doorway like the Third Man. He threw his cigarette to the floor, smiled grimly, and went back inside.

No sooner had Kerantzky gone back inside than there came a great many

high pitched screams bursting through the windows and doorways of the pub. The highly volatile and irrational Kerantzky had urged his men to join him in venting fury on the leaderless League of Mordred. It wasn't too long before there seemed to be no League of Mordred left to issue any further high pitched screams, but there were warlocks – and ready to do battle – almost.

The screams, as well as a variety of sounds suggesting pain, death, fear and panic, continued unabated. The professor could not be sure if they had had anything to do with it, but he couldn't take any chances.

"Er – gentlemen, if you would be so kind – RUN!"

With Professor Cornstone leading, they dashed further on down the lane, but as they raced along, the paving stones ahead blew up right in front of them in a huge yellow and orange explosion. This was followed by another death-bolt which ripped up the tarmac on the road. Each time the four men went to run for it there was an almighty explosion, but so far these had been some way short of their targets.

The first death-bolt had come from Kerantzky, now standing on the roof of the Steed and Vine. The second had come from up above, fired by a sky-borne warlock on his broomstick.

The sky was soon full of them.

The supposed kidnappers and hostages were trapped. They all knew that the warlocks would eventually score a direct hit, even if by accident. They needed a miracle.

Just as Kerantzky was about to release his crescent death-slice – the bowed razor sharp lightning beam which had consigned Zadzuk to history – he was distracted by several tiles from the roof being blown clean off. He looked over the field in the direction of the wand-fire, to see the astonishing sight of a caravan, slowly ascending in height, and with its horse just nonchalantly clip-clopping away on thin air. The caravan stopped at about fifty feet up, and stranger still, had an odd arrangement of people on the top of it. Although the caravan could very easily have remained invisible for the duration of the skirmish, one very important reason dictated the necessity of it being visible to one and all, at least until the engagement was over: fighting a battle from its roof-top meant full and constant spatial appreciation was essential. The power of such magic was limited to the caravan only, and could not be extended to its passengers who just happened to be on the outside of it, even if on the roof or holding on to the sides.

Gregor, from his central position on the roof-top, was shouting orders and encouraging his troops. Through his clever reading of positions and angles, the Irregulars were steadily picking off the airborne warlocks. After the first salvo, eighteen warlocks had fallen from their broomsticks and were dead before they had hit the ground. He had positioned his little unit so cleverly, that in terms of angles of fire they could cover almost 360 degrees, in a way, as each of the airborne Irregulars had been allotted fifteen to twenty degrees each, to cover with their battle-wands. Gregor had had to be flexible on this,

due to the different ages, strength, dexterity and even arm lengths of the Irregulars. It wasn't perfect of course, and achieving 100% globular or 3D coverage was totally impossible, but they performed magnificently nonetheless. The only other deviation from this was that those firing downwards had to ensure their battle-wands were held at generously wide angles, thus preventing the caravan from being reduced to matchsticks by friendly fire.

Despite the considerable early success of Gregor's geometrical guerrilla tactics, the caravan-top Irregulars had rapidly become outnumbered, and their element of surprise was now gone. Gregor knew that they could still defend their own position well, but this was not enough when taking the task in hand in to consideration. Covering fire and a rescue attempt were necessary if their friends on the ground were going to be saved. He looked around and then over and down towards the farm. He smiled to himself as the very thing he was looking for finally came into focus.

After asking some of the more dextrous of the troop to carry two battle-wands while hostilities continued, Second-in-Command Gregor Ojstott along with three of his fellow Irregulars, quickly left the field of battle.

Although the roof-top fusiliers were still doing a magnificent job of drawing much of the enemy's fire on to themselves and deflecting it with ruthless efficiency, they were no longer taking any of the warlocks down. The savagely brilliant warriors were keeping their distance and flying in such crazy formations, that they were not the easy targets they had been only minutes before. It was also alarmingly obvious that Josh Beecham, Edwin Cornstone, Anton Lieberman and Bill Dooley were all still in grave peril down on the country lane.

It looked bad. The warlocks had already regrouped, splitting themselves into two airborne units, one was deliberately playing out a draw with the strange gathering atop of the caravan, the other unit was awaiting its chance to eliminate the four stranded wizards on the lane. Even Kerantzky was ready once more to fire his crescent death-slice – but all were distracted yet again.

This time a strange, thumping, thundering sound could be heard. Just as Kerantzky and his men were about to begin their barrage of death, seven more warlocks were killed outright and Kerantzky had his prized battle-wand blown right out of his hand. He was soon to notice that his right hand had gone with it. He screamed in pain, clasped his bleeding arm and screamed again, but this time it was a curse on the WFW for all eternity.

Dashing up to the four trapped men were Ernst, Gregor and Ted and Franky, all riding shiny black Hanoverian horses, commandeered from old man Nellis's stables. It was Ernst and Gregor's skill as cavalrymen which enabled them to both ride like the wind, while at the same time rapidly firing off a multitude of death-bolts which kept the warlocks at bay and had severely disabled Kerantzky. Ted and Franky, although a little uncertain in the saddle, were still excellent in their complementing of the two

professionals.

Rather surprisingly, Ezekiel Creek suddenly came to the fore. Seeing a slight advantage for the Irregulars both in the air and on the ground, the unofficial Third-in-Command took one person in three from the roof-top defences, and these provided covering fire while each of the four men were helped up on to each of the horses. Beau just smiled, he was impressed. He might not have smiled, or been so impressed, if he'd have actually been told beforehand that he had been left in charge of the caravan – he had not been. Professor Cornstone had not changed his mind, nor had he erroneously assumed that Beau could mind-read, he'd simply forgotten.

It still wasn't over, for either side. A warlock called Zezk who had been jealous of Kerantzky for years, climbed up onto the roof, plunged his sword into Kerantzky's chest, and proclaimed himself the new leader of the Warlocks of Bucharest. As Kerantzky fell, Zezk shouted to those left to again regroup.

The horses thundered back down the lane towards the caravan, which had moved over the field and descended down on to the road to meet them. There was only yards to go when seven incoming death-bolts from different directions killed the two front horses outright, with their riders forcefully ejected but thankfully not seriously hurt. The remaining two reared up and threw their riders and passengers clean off their backs and raced off down the lane. The caravan-roof fusiliers again fired up and took out six more warlocks, allowing a little respite for the caravaneers to bring the four men to relative safety. Despite being heavily bruised and sore, all of them were otherwise unharmed.

An infuriated Zezk looked on from the pub roof. He spat, cursed and then prepared himself to release a triple death-bolt. However, one of the Irregulars at least had not forgotten him nor the threat he still posed, and while the kidnappers and hostages were still being fussed over, he broke away and then doubled back to the Steed and Vine as fast as he could. Speed and surprise were of paramount importance.

Zezk raised his wand and began to utter the incantation, but was then stunned to find Mike Miller, rapidly descending upon him on a broomstick.

Mike swooped down, snatched the battle-wand, turned, and rammed right into Zezk, knocking him off the roof with only the motionless body of his former leader breaking his fall and preventing certain death.

Upon seeing the fall of Zezk-of-a-Thousand-Seconds, the remaining warlocks decided the battle was lost and disappeared into the night sky.

Mike flew down to where his friends and their hostages were standing around, some were too dazed to move, others milled around creating welcome hubbub.

As Mike dismounted, Professor Cornstone immediately spotted his broomstick.

"That is my broomstick, Miller! What on earth do you think you are playing at?!"

Mike, although well used to Professor Cornstone, could not believe this pettiness and so just ignored him.

"Well?!" continued the irate professor.

Bill Dooley took an instant dislike to Mike's antagonist and punched him right in the mouth. In an instant battle-wands were pointed at him from every direction, but Bill Dooley just smiled and raised his hands. Most of the others smiled, too, upon seeing the downfall of this most arrogant man. Josh turned to Dooley, forgetting he was the enemy.

"You don't know the Dead Leprechauns of Tralee, do you?"

Dooley just looked at him funnily. Josh decided not to repeat the question.

Mike nodded and smiled at all the others in turn. He didn't care about thanks, but if he did he knew he would be the one forever saying thank you, but neither did his friends care about such things.

As for Professor Cornstone, Mike knew that despite their mutual loathing, he knew the professor was very brave and respected him for it. The strange thing was, Professor Cornstone, again rubbing a reddened chin, suddenly spoke to Mike.

"My broomstick notwithstanding, that was a very brave thing you did there, Miller, very brave indeed. It's a wonder any of these old biddies let you do it, though, I've seen the way they mollycoddle their own . . . Ouch!"

"If you speak of Jacinta or my lads, or any of our friends like that again, I'll thump you!" said Nathaniel Morse, who had come over to see if his sons were OK.

"You just did!" said Professor Cornstone, whose chin was now very red and very sore, matching his equally sore cheek.

"Oh yes, so I did!" said Nathaniel Morse with a sly smile.

"You lot! Will you stop thumping each other, even Edwin, and climb aboard." It was Jacinta Morse.

The job wasn't quite over for Professor Cornstone. He needed to check whether the Steed and Vine was now devoid of all enemy forces. He didn't know quite what he would do with more prisoners if this were not the case, but more importantly he couldn't risk the enemy yet again regrouping or following them. He put this to the gathering purely as an act of keeping them informed, as he had assumed that this task would again fall to himself and Josh Beecham, but this was not to be the case in this instance.

"Professor Cornstone, how about if Beau, Ted, and I go? We haven't done much yet. (Nathaniel Morse ruefully shook his head at this). We could at least do this for you while you rest. Yes?" asked Franky Morse.

The professor thought, stroked his chin, and nodded. "One thing, though, take Lardo here with you, he hasn't done much yet either."

Laszlo sighed and rose to go. Although he was no coward he didn't believe in making a fuss, especially over such an unpleasant creature as Professor Cornstone. However, Marina's philosophy on life was rather different.

"Ow!" said Professor Cornstone, yet again rubbing a now exceptionally sore cheek.

Ted and Franky smiled and gave Marina a thumbs-up sign as they stepped down off the caravan. This was not only to show approval of her fiery spirit, but that they would take good care of her childhood sweetheart now boyfriend of many years.

Apart from the absence of the mopping up brigade, relative calm returned, with relative being the operative word. Barry stepped out to inspect the body work of the caravan. The metal plates were dented, the woodwork was splintered and the usually plush varnish and paintwork had been badly scratched.

"Look at this! I told ya before, Professor Cornstone, I ain't payin' for any repairs. That's the best hand-brushing paint that is! Just look at them scrapes and gashes! Gah! Only one fing for it, she'll have to go to the menders – and yer can res' assured I'll be sendin' the bill to 'Emlock 'All!"

"You can send the bill to Professor Zenith for all I care!" shouted Professor Cornstone from the caravan to his annoying colleague. He went back to discussing with Josh what their next move regarding Lieberman and Dooley was to be. What happened next did not help.

Estella had been crying. She had seen Lieberman and she knew she was looking at one of the murderers of her friend Hillary. She walked up to him and slapped him several times hard across the face. Lieberman just looked down. It should have been a look of shame but it was that of sadness. 'Sad for himself!' thought Estella, and slapped him again. Harder than before.

Mike looked on, shocked, as he had no knowledge of this part of recent events.

Josh was about to gently guide Estella away, but found and rather surprisingly at that, that Ernst had already decided to do so. Josh just smiled.

"Come on Ez, that won't do any good. Come on, sit here with me – we'll talk it through, come on," said a sympathetic Ernst.

Once again, Professor Cornstone tried to begin sorting out the situation regarding their two prisoners, but at that moment he was disturbed yet again. "Ere! What's up wiv Mike?!" yelled Barry. Everyone on the caravan turned round. Mike was disappearing.

It took a few seconds for Mike himself to realise what was happening and he began to panic. He felt as if he was in some kind of invisible chamber. He banged with his fists on some kind of solid yet invisible surface.

"Help! What's happening?! Help me!" Mike was gone.

There were looks of shock and horror on everyone's faces and of anger from Josh. "Not again! Professor Winch promised me!"

"I promised he would be kept out of danger, Josh, but I never said where he would end up after his captivity." It was Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph. Josh went to the end of the caravan to continue the conversation.

"That is not fair, Professor! Please don't use weasel words on me, I don't like it – especially from you!"

"Come, come, Josh, I'm sorry if you are upset over Mike leaving like this, but he is in safe hands."

"Where has he ended up this time? China? Tierra Del Fuego?"

"Yes, Tierra Del Fuego."

"What?!"

"Only joking, Josh. Right at this minute he is being pressed rather unfairly by Vincent Stannich to tell him if there were any urban wolf-whales in the lounge of the Steed and Vine."

"Oh, Krickenstaltz! I was hoping he had stopped his globetrotting, but at least he's with friends. I'm sorry if I was a little short with you, Professor."

"How can you be, Josh? You are six foot three."

"Ha ha. Seriously, though, will he be OK?"

"I won't lie, Josh, I can't guarantee absolute safety for Mike or for anyone, but if he was back at school, would you feel any happier?"

"Yes, of course. Why ask that?"

"Because, Josh, in my estimation, he is just as safe at Krickenstaltz as he is at Hemlock Hall, regardless of how safe, safe happens to be, if you get my drift."

"Yes, with you, Professor. One more thing, though. Why?"

"It's a little niggling thing called a magic round trip. Don't you remember? You've had some recent experience of it yourself. Mike went to Blackpool from Krickenstaltz, back he goes. I can't do a damn thing about it."

"Oh, that nonsense. I had forgotten all about that. I think it's about time something was done about all this, if you don't mind my saying, Professor."

"I greatly sympathise, Josh, but you know old Engelbert and Septimus: they've blocked every attempt at introducing magic over-rides for such forms of travel to and from the Academy. I could overrule them, even get them replaced, but I won't do that. They have done too much good for too many years – I won't treat them so shabbily.

"Now, back to the matter in hand: I am also calling to let you know that I really do need the Chaotagen Wand here with me, as soon as possible."

"I beg your pardon, Professor? Chaotagen Wand? What about it?" said a confused white-faced Josh.

"I told Edwin a short while ago, make sure he retrieves the wand. You did get it? You do have it on the caravan with you, don't you?"

"Pardon me, Professor, but can you hold on, just for a minute."

Josh walked over to Professor Cornstone and whispered in his ear. It was Professor Cornstone's turn to go white with horror and red with embarrassment. Professor Winch sensed a problem and transferred his call to Professor Cornstone, who duly spluttered his response.

"I am dreadfully sorry, Headmaster, I really am. With the ease at which we captured the two prisoners, it sort of knocked me out of my stride. I just totally forgot to track it down. All is not lost though, we have a mopping up party checking things over. Maybe they will find it. Ah, here they are now. Hold on a mo. . . "

As the mopping up brigade climbed back on board, Franky and co. were immediately bombarded with questions concerning their findings. Did they look for the wand? Did they find the wand? If not, was there anybody left in the pub who might have it? If so, did he have it? If not, did he know who did?

Eventually Josh put his hand over Professor Cornstone's mouth to give the mopping up brigade a chance to speak.

"Just hold on a second. Franky's trying to tell you something!" yelled Josh.

"Here! We found this and that's all!" said an exasperated Franky.

It was a note. Professor Cornstone snatched it from Franky and read it out loud:

'GREETINGS, MY HONOURABLE ADVERSARIES.
YOU WIN TONIGHT. KERANTZKY LOSES. BUT I AM NOT KERANTZKY!
I AM ZEZK. I AM THE NEW LEADER OF THE WARLOCKS OF BUCHAREST.
YOU WILL NOT FIND IT SO EASY NEXT TIME. THERE WILL SOON BE MANY LEGIONS AT MY COMMAND. WE WILL REGROUP, AND THEN WE WILL WIN!
WE HAVE YOUR PRECIOUS WAND.
COME TO ROMANIA AND GET IT! IF YOU DARE!'

"Edwin? Josh? Are you there?"

"Yes, Professor, here." said Josh.

But an absolutely outraged Professor Cornstone snapped at his leader.

"YES! WHAT?!"

"Now now, Edwin, calm down if you please, all is not lost. It would seem as if this ambitious Zezk is not too bright. Zenith will shortly arrive on these shores. The warlocks, or more accurately Zezk and a handful of survivors, have left for Romania, which means there is still distance between the wand and the book. And of course we do have Mike out of their clutches. I had hoped we would have been able to take the wand out of the equation, but no matter, we do still have the upper hand for now.

"So please, Edwin, head for home, I fear Barry's toad in the hole will be burnt if you do not!"

But the call wasn't over yet as Professor Winch suddenly remembered he had one more important point for Edwin and Josh to digest. Before speaking again, he quickly adjusted the settings to absolutely ensure that his call on the telemagickeraph could only be heard by Professor Cornstone and Josh Beecham. As a further precaution he cast a long-distance spell over the rest of the passengers on board the caravan, which would prevent them from hearing the undoubted exclamations of disbelief from Edwin and Josh, which would surely be the case in reaction to what they were about to hear.

"Oh, one more thing: please take extra special care of our two guests. Get them everything they need or want, just as you would the others."

"Why on earth should I do that, Headmaster?" asked an astounded Professor Cornstone.

"Because they are on our side and always have been. But do not share this information with your comrades or indeed with anyone else, for the time being at least. And now, gentlemen, I must go. Bye-bye, Edwin, and you, Josh."

"But Headmaster! This cannot be!"

But Professor Winch was gone, but not to sit back in an easy chair with a Cuban cigar and a brandy, but to put together a special task force. This would consist of specialists from various departments and squads, and together they would put right the chaos and carnage the recent engagement had brought upon a usually quiet and peaceful backwater.

Minutes later the force had assembled; very shortly after that it was in the air. Apart from having to make one minor diversion to the stables of Krickenstaltz to pick up four black Hanoverian horses, the emergency magic task force was en route to Thornton.

50

Back to Basics

"HELP! Let me out! Where am I?!"

Mike continued to bang on the invisible barrier. At first, he could see and hear the ensuing chaos among those frantically shouting back to him, with their faces contorted in horror at his unexpected mode of departure, but they soon began to disappear from Mike's view in a psychedelic haze.

For the next minute or so, all he could see around him was a purple and yellow mist and sensed that he was moving rapidly through it. After the sensation of motion had eased, gradually coming into sharp focus from this hazy blur was something, or rather somewhere familiar. He breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. He was outside the sixth oak door at Krickenstaltz. Although he really had wanted to finally return to Hemlock Hall, this was a very fine substitute.

The invisible barrier disappeared, if something already invisible can do such a thing, and Mike was able to turn and walk along the passageway. There to greet him were Vincent and Juliette.

"Hiya, Mike, me old mate! Ain' I glad to see you!" said Juliette.

"You cheeky so and so!" said Vincent, pretending to be vexed at his sister's mimicking.

Mike, rapidly getting over the shock of his removal from the caravan, burst out laughing and joyfully hugged the pair of them.

"'Ere, Mike! I might make a shampoo commercial yet, all this new man mush!" quipped Vincent.

There was more laughter which prevented the three from noticing that they had been joined by more familiar faces.

"Hello again, Mike! You can't get away from us that easily!" It was Ernst and the rest of the Krickenstaltz contingent.

"But, how did you all. . . ?"

"Same as you, Mike. No sooner had we settled down again after realising you would be all right, we all followed," said Ernst. "Don't forget, we all came out the same way so we've all had to come back the same way. Even military over-rides, although exceptions in one sense, are still subject to the same laws where possible. It's all to do with energy efficiency, apparently. So even craggy old timers, like Josh, are dragged right back."

"'Ere!" protested Josh, but he was kidding.

"But why the gap?" asked Mike.

"Age, Mike, age," replied Gregor. "Minors are always catered for first when there has been any degree of disturbance to the forces involved, but none of us have ever seen that rather dramatic recall before. I think I'll have a word

with old Septimus and Engelbert about that."

"Oh, I see," said Mike, not really getting to grips with the mechanics of transmuting, nor having any idea just who these esteemed gentlemen just referred to actually were. He looked around to see Marina, Laszlo and Gregor, standing there, smiling. Bertie was there, too, still with red eyes and just staring into space.

His fellow journeymen and women sensed that Mike really wanted to settle down, and after a gesture from Ernst they all went off to report to Professor Stannich the elder.

"Bye, see you later!" They all smiled, waved and were gone.

"Listen, you two, I'm shattered, cold, hungry, and I need a bath. Can we meet up later?" said Mike.

"No problem, Mike, we're just glad to see you again. You won't call ghost trains soppy from now on, will you?!" joked Juliette. "By the way, you have some fantastic friends at Hemlock Hall, Mike: Abigail, Madeline and I are all good friends ourselves now, and that's all thanks to you!"

She kissed Mike on the cheek which quickly became as red as a Canadian apple. Vincent was equally pleased at meeting Dutch who seemed to have become his opposite number.

"Yeah, Mike, that Dutch! He's just like me! He says if he can fix it we can go to his when you are all there in the holidays. What do you think of that?" added Vincent.

To Mike, things were finally getting better and better and better. "That is absolutely fantastic news! And I'm glad you get on with the girls, especially Abigail, because you are both so alike," said Mike, turning to Juliette.

"What?! You mean Abigail's a know-all, bossy, and horrible to her brother?!"

"Ah, you got that wrong! Abigail hasn't got a brother!" retorted Mike.

Juliette laughed out loud. "Oh yeah, I messed that up, didn't I?"

"And I'm glad you get on with Dutch, Vince. I wasn't sure whether you would do, he can be a handful sometimes."

"And so can I, me ole mucker, so can I!"

"You're dead right there. D'ya know, I really am shattered. Erm – this is going to seem daft, but I have no idea of what day it is, or even the time."

"It's Tuesday, Mike, and it's ten past four," replied Vincent.

"Right, Vince, wake me for dinner. I'm just off to have a quick bath and then a kip."

"Were there any urban wolf-whales there, Mike?"

"Later, Vince, see you at dinner, Juliette."

"Yeah, see you, then. Bye," said Juliette, walking off back to her room.

Mike lifted his arm. No TMG. "Oh flip! I forgot. It's gone!"

Vincent was delighted with this unexpected opportunity. "We'll have to use mine, then, won't we? Which means I'll have to come with you, which means you can tell me all about what happened after you shot off again in the ghost train!"

Mike groaned, but then smiled. He was glad to be with friends again.

Forty-five minutes later they were lying in twin baths opposite each other, and had received their last warning from Peter Wimpole for time wasting – and farting in the bath.

A short while later, Mike climbed into bed and was soon in a deep sleep, until. . . "Vake up – scum boy! It iz time for your marinated ratz!"

"Wh-wha-what!" Mike sat bolt upright. It couldn't be Kerantzky! Surely he was dead? It wasn't. It was Vincent. "I'll get you for that!" said Mike, flinging the bolster at his tormentor. He then burst into a fit of laughter, more out of relief that it was indeed only Vincent, and that to his knowledge, Kerantzky was indeed as dead as a doornail.

They went off to dinner. As the two boys reached their usual table, Mike was surprised to find Juliette and Ellen already sitting there waiting for them. Ellen smiled, stood, walked round to Mike, and kissed him on the cheek.

"I could get used to this!" said the again blushing Mike out loud, but only meaning to think it. There were chortles all round.

"Don't get cross, Mike," said Ellen, "but when I first saw you, I really thought you were a vagabond that the professor had taken under his wing to straighten out, a sort of second chance thing. The kiss was not only to say sorry, but thank you. I now realise that you are very brave. Gregor told me all about it. If it had not been for your quick thinking and bravery, he and the others could have been killed. Thank you."

Mike looked like half a dozen of the shiniest Royal Galas, but he was gradually getting used to dealing with compliments. He kept a straight face and said nonchalantly, "All in a day's work. Pass me the salt, would you?"

There was more laughter which again upset our City gents who had still not kept their promise to patronise another establishment, but this did not deter the happy crew.

As Ellen went to fetch them all their evening meal, Vincent – and even Juliette, continued to bombard Mike with questions on his recent escapades.

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Red Herrings

THE HEMLOCK HALL CONTINGENT with prisoners in tow, arrived back at the school. They alighted from the caravan and stood and waved (even Lieberman and Dooley), as Barry and Fred sped off. They could just work out something about a cold tea and a wife who would go bananas, then the caravan was gone.

Josh, Edwin, Ted and Franky all acted as escort to Lieberman and Big Bill Dooley. They were no trouble at all, but this was all to do with Big Bill being in a perfectly equable mood. Ted and Franky were not daft; one look at Bill and they knew what the outcome would most likely be if he wasn't such a willing hostage.

Professor Winch had been in contact again to say that all six must report directly to him on their return.

Professor Cornstone, totally dumbfounded by Professor Winch's revelation concerning the two prisoners, said nothing to either friend or foe and simply led the group through to Professor Winch's office. The professor was standing behind his desk waiting to greet his guests.

"Ah, there you all are. Come in! Come in and take a seat, that's it. So, Bill, how are you after many years in the wilderness?"

Bill answered in a tough, gruff, British hoodlum sort of voice.

"Musn' grumble, Mr Winchy, sir, musn' grumble. Glad to be away from those nutters though, fort I was never comin' back."

'Mr Winchy' smiled. Bill Dooley, for all his fitness and fighting abilities was not the brightest wizard, or spy, but the professor liked him all the same.

"Glad to hear it! And you, Anthony?"

"I must agree with William there, Professor. Between having to placate those ghastly League of Mordred monsters, suffer those agonising needle mists, and t omake matters worse, having to welcome those warlocks — huurrghhh! I will be glad to get some fishin' in over the next few days and relax a little."

Professor Winch smiled — and grimaced, waiting for the inevitable and most probably opposite reactions from Edwin and Josh.

Upon hearing Lieberman's cut glass English accent, the pair nearly fell out of their seats.

"I hope you don't mind my saying, Professor," said Josh, with a big grin on his face, "but you've pulled some stunts in your time, but this one takes the cake!"

But Professor Cornstone was fuming.

"Professor Winch, sir! We may have had many rows over the years, and

normally you have proved me wrong! But Anton Lieberman – liar, murderer, and thief! – sitting here in your office grinning like a Cumbrian dog! Have you lost your senses?! Sir!"

Professor Winch was sorely tempted to indulge in a little wall shaking and picture removals, but he resisted.

"First of all, Edwin, I think you will find the saying is, Cheshire cat. Now, gentlemen . . . I am about to discuss with some of you a number of things: some of what you will hear will provide enlightenment, although perhaps not satisfaction, or even closure as our non-magic friends often say, but you do indeed need to hear it.

"Before we commence, however, due to the confidential and even top-secret nature of what is about to be revealed, I need to implement the need to know protocol. Ted? Franky? Would the pair of you be so kind and take Mr Dooley here for a pint in one of our esteemed village hostelries?"

"Er – fanks 'n' all, Mr Winchy, sir, but I'd sooner goes the pub," said Big Bill.

"On second thoughts, that's probably a better idea," said the diplomatic Professor Winch, who gave a quick glance of disapproval to the smirking faces seated around his desk.

"Cor! Smashin'!" said the big man. "An' that smithy fella looks a right character, any chance o' takin' 'im?"

"Please do," replied Professor Winch, "he'll be delighted."

Ted and Franky, although slightly disappointed not to be in on the forthcoming revelations, dutifully obeyed. "Come on, big fella, I bet you're crap at darts," chanced Franky.

"You cheeky blighter!" replied Big Bill. He was so delighted to be once again in joshing company, he slapped Franky on the back, accidentally slamming him into the wall. "Ow!" said Franky.

"I bet you are a great darts player, aren't you?" said Ted.

As the others waited patiently to get down to business, they could just about hear Big Bill as they made their way along the hallway.

"Diamond geezers, the pair o' yer! Come 'ere! Give old Bill a hug!"

"Ow!" said Franky. "Ow!" said Ted.

Back in the office, Professor Winch, after being certain that the unfortunate few who were not on the privileged side of the need to know protocol were out of earshot, spoke down the telemagickeraph.

"Ezekiel, it's Gabriel. Please come to my office, I need to discuss something with you."

Professor Winch put the telemagickeraph under the desk and looked around the gathering, although his countenance far from suggested calm and contentment. This was just as Professor Creek came into the office and sat down.

"Thank you, Ezekiel. Now, gentlemen, from hereonin until we are finished here today, I need absolute concentration from you all, as I am shortly to open and read a recently declassified top-secret file. I also have to tell you

all that I will, let's say, be more than stretching a point with regard to your becoming privy to its contents. This is something I know for sure my fellow Council members would not agree with, but that does not unduly worry me and is not for you to concern yourselves with. Now, please bear with me, just for a moment. . ."

Professor Winch began to root around his desk in search of a certain document. He eventually found it, waved his wand over a barcode at the top right hand of the cover, and passed it to Professor Cornstone, who snatched it and ripped it open.

Although the message could be read in the usual way it could also be audibly heard.

As he was the file's current custodian, it was Professor Winch's own voice which emanated from the pages, allowing the rest of the gathering to hear what Professor Cornstone was reading:

'START FILE : 29 JULY 1928 TOP SECRET:

FOR WFW COUNCIL & BRITISH MAGIC COUNCIL (MINISTERS & AIDES ONLY) FOR FURTHER CLASSIFICATION AFTER SUBJECT MATTER HAS BEEN DIVULGED. AGREED ACTION CONCERNING OPERATIONS MUDD & LIEBERMAN.

AGENT ASSIGNED: ANTHONY FFYFFE-TREMAYNE.

OUTLINE AND BACKDROP: THE SHET-NAM INSURGENCY 1924-1927.

In 1924, the Shet-Nam Islands, traditionally a stoically loyal region of our community – our magic archipelago existing parallel to the Shetland Islands, suddenly declared unilateral independence. However, it eventually became clear that the Shet-Namese people were acting under duress. We became aware of the true situation after a small group of islanders had managed to escape their overlords, procure a boat from Wizwick Harbour and make their way over to our lines.

After initial disbelief, the terrible truth then became only too clear. The insurgency was being led by none other than Professor Zenith and his followers, The League of Mordred.

It also turned out that a spy had been in our midst – one Corporal Jake Halibut. The terrible losses we suffered on our initial sorties were all down to him passing vital information on our strategy and positions to Professor Zenith, holed up with his followers on a desolate private estate near Baltasound, on the non-magic sector of the Island of Unst. From here he could act on the information received, travel southward to our own Mainland island, and wait to ambush our troops.

It was very fortunate for us that Corporal Halibut was not aware that he had been compromised, and we very quickly put a plan together, called – 'Operation Flatfish' – to utilise the unwitting Halibut and turn the tables on Professor Zenith, but there was a complication.

Colonel Max Carton, the Commander of the front line – was told to send a message on a known compromised communication line only, asking for reinforcements as we were going to advance. This message was to be sent to a Captain Ezekiel Creek, Captain of the Rearguard at the Wizwick encampment. This was to throw Professor Zenith off our trail while we then used stealth to pick off their supply lines and troop musters. Unfortunately, an intense battery of incoming death-bolts caused confusion, and the colonel himself was injured. His adjutant, trying to get him to the field hospital, knew that the colonel was trying to say something, but due to the noise and confusion all around them and with the colonel's injuries making speech very difficult, the adjutant could not clearly make out the colonel's words. But eventually he translated the message as being – 'Send three and four-pence, we are going to a dance'.

Although it was fortunate that the mis-hearing and subsequent relaying and sending of the message did not damage our plans, in fact, through a serendipitous chance in a million, it aided them, it still had serious personal repercussions for Captain Creek.

(At this, both Josh and Ezekiel were stunned. They both stood, went to say something, saw Professor Winch gently shake his head, and both sat back down again).

Upon his return to good health and active duty, Colonel Carton, not knowing of this terrible mishap, blamed Captain Creek and had him court martialed for insubordination. By this time, the adjutant, the only person who could verify Captain Creek's story, was dead. It was to be a further three years before the truth could be verified. This is when a transcript of the message was found buried deep in mud on the site of the old adjutant's office, which had been demolished to make way for the WFW's new parade ground.

Unfortunately, security considerations prevent Captain Creek from being publicly cleared of all charges, although this may be possible once the declassification date of this file has been reached. But the consequences of this mix up, as tragic as they were for Captain Creek, were equally tragic for the enemy.

It turned out that the message, as corrupted as it had become from what was intended, was also an activation code for all operatives of all sectors to

gather at the Glastonbury Headquarters and await further orders. This order was only ever expected to be issued in the direst of emergencies, such as the imminent release of a Chaotagen. As the colonel was not around to make it clear it was a red herring, the message was taken at face value. Headquarters very soon become far more than just the administrative offices of the WFW, and was turned into the largest gathering in one place of elite military and intelligence troops and operatives that had ever been known before.

Unfortunately for The League of Mordred, who were the intended recipients of the original message, they assumed it was code for an imminent attack upon them, and so Zenith decided on pre-emptive action. He mustered The League of Mordred and engaged in what he was quickly to realise was an ill-planned virtually suicidal assault on our HQ. It was only a matter of a few hours later that roughly a third of their number were dead, another third or so were in our custody, and the remainder had retreated.

After sifting through those captured, we found that we had in our custody, Frank Mudd, Third-in-Command of The League of Mordred, and none other than Anton Lieberman, Second-in-Command. Due to the severity of their crimes, neither were allowed to claim the status of political prisoner, and a trial, held in-camra and classified top-secret, was held within a day of their capture. Both men were found guilty of many different crimes including mass-murder. They were sentenced to death but with the sentence commuted to life imprisonment, as is always the case within our community.

OUTLINE: CURRENT SITUATION

It has been just over three years since the failed attack by The League of Mordred on the Glastonbury Headquarters of the WFW. At this moment in time, both high ranking League members are still imprisoned. However, due to massive advances in various branches of magic since the failed attack and resulting incarcerations, we now believe we have our best ever opportunity to infiltrate The League of Mordred and to get close to Professor Zenith.

Because of such advances, we are now in a position to propose the use of brand new magic procedures and spells, commonly known as 'Magic-Fusion'.

OUTLINE: OPERATION MUDD

A volunteer, currently a WFW operative, will undergo Magic-Fusion. He will take on the persona of League member, Frank Mudd. He will then escape from Glastonbury Prison, make his way to Professor Zenith's Shetland estate, and then receive his new orders. He will then return to Glastonbury to brief his true superiors – on what those new orders are. This will give us an

indication of Zenith's movements, plans, strategies, supplies and manpower.

Mudd will then be recaptured and returned to prison.

Zenith, of course, will change some of his plans as a result of Mudd's recapture, but we will still have a general idea of his strengths and weaknesses. A more long-term operation will then commence.

OUTLINE: OPERATION LIEBERMAN

The operative will then be subjected to the most effective long-term Magic-Fusion spell currently available. He will then assume the persona of one Anton Lieberman, Professor Zenith's Romanian Second-in-Command.

OUTLINE: IMMEDIATE ACTION & PERIPHERIES

The operative we have chosen is, as already stated, a volunteer. He is fully aware of all that we will ask of him. He is adaptable to sudden change and works well under stress. He is a languages expert and can assimilate all the nuances of new languages and respective cultures quickly. His real name is Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne.

Similar to the staged prison break when posing as Mudd, Ffyffe-Tremayne will escape once more, but this time in the guise of Lieberman. This will be part of a two-man breakout, more details on this will follow. Once the fake Lieberman has been accepted, the operative will be expected to stay in character, even when among allies. This is to ensure plausibility at all times.

Ironically, our ultimate aim, is – with Professor Zenith's encouragement – for Lieberman to then supposedly infiltrate our own community, convince WFW superiors he has changed sides, and so become in Zenith's eyes, their best double agent and even more worthy of his high position in The League of Mordred. Lieberman will then be able to come and go to and from both enemy and friendly camps. Zenith will think he has, via Lieberman, infiltrated the WFW, but in reality we will have infiltrated The League of Mordred.

We recognise that there are no guarantees of success, nor that the agent will not be compromised at some point. However, we feel that the presence of an assistant may aid Ffyffe-Tremayne to both maintain the deception, and provide a strong physical defence should this ever become necessary.

It has been agreed that our most highly decorated soldier, an extremely strong and capable fighting man, become this assistant. His name is William Dooley. He will of course, be thought of by the enemy as having defected to them after supposedly having been court martialed several times for a range

of criminal offences, only to escape from prison, taking Lieberman with him to join his new and evil allies. Although we cannot ensure that Dooley will be posted as his assistant, we are nevertheless relying on Ffyffe-Tremayne's skills to manipulate the situation so that this indeed is the outcome, but even if this is somehow prevented we would at least have another agent deep inside The League of Mordred.

From Ffyffe-Tremayne's perspective it will admittedly be very difficult for him in some ways.

It is proposed that only the most senior staff know of these plans, which means that for many years Ffyffe-Tremayne will be at least suspected and perhaps reviled by some of our own people over his true allegiance – or more accurately, his perceived lack thereof.

Ultimately, it will be at our behest as to when he can revert back to being Ffyffe-Tremayne, although we will consider any justifiable request from him for this to happen. However, this will only be considered in the event of imminent discovery and exposure of his real identity by the enemy.

Signed:

L. Backslapper
Lionel Backslapper
War Minister
WFW

B. Rivington-Pike
Lord B. Rivington-Pike
Lord Mayor
British Magic Council

JULY 29 1928

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JULY 29 1968

ADDENDUM TO MAIN FILE: PROGRESS REPORT: OPERATION LIEBERMAN

The deployment of Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne in the guise of Anton Lieberman, The League of Mordred's Second-in-Command, has to date been an astounding success. We have every reason to believe that this will also continue to be the case in the foreseeable future. Through his presence at many top secret meetings attended by Professor Zenith, many proposed attacks on our community have been prevented. The effects of those that were not were considerably lessened due to early warnings passed on by Ffyffe-Tremayne to his WFW superiors.

As well as the prevention of attacks, information gleaned by Lieberman over

the years has resulted in raids being made by our own people on many suspected members of The League of Mordred. Many arrests were made as a result of these raids. The most successful of these were carried out in March and April of this year, upon the offices of a supposedly legitimate firm of Accountants, Lawyers, Property Agents, and Bailiffs, sometimes called 'Coyle, Byrne, Mercer and May'. But it soon became clear that all four partners had used every variation of their names and business practices to confuse the authorities, in the event of any criminal or civil action taken against them. Similar to the mass arrests after the Glastonbury skirmish, it was found that members of the League were only too willing to trade information in the hope of gaining leniency in court.

1. League member Hilton Coyle confessed to illegal asset stripping in 1939, of the highly profitable book publishing company, Anglo-German Dictionaries, owned by Lord Jules Tunstall. Up until Coyle's confession, it was always a mystery to both communities as to why his Lordship never replied to the joint offer of continued production throughout hostilities for issue to both sets of specialist troops.
Sentence: Life Imprisonment.

2. League member Perseus May confessed to trying to steal the proceeds of the sale of The Sweet Emporium in Hemlock Village, and to pass these monies on to his evil overlord. He was interrogated further to clarify 'trying', and he could only come out with garbled ramblings about a 'battle-axe with a brolly'. He was later admitted to the sanatorium.

3. League members Antrobus Byrne and Sephton Mercer pleaded for leniency on the grounds of being non-combatants. They claimed they were simply the junior accountants for The League of Mordred. But Byrne did offer information concerning the committing of crimes many years previously against the Miller family, proprietors of The Magic Patents Office. He gave the locationof documents which he said would prove that the first Magic Patents Officer, Jeremiah Miller, was killed by Professor Zenith and that the special fund set up by Jeremiah for one Raith Cornstone and/or his descendants, was defrauded away by the evil professor. After further interrogation and intensive research, it became clear that Byrne was telling the truth.
Sentences: Byrne: Thirty Years Imprisonment. Mercer: Forty Years Imprisonment.

An extra ten years was levied against Mercer, as he was positively incriminated by Byrne for the crime of 'Deception and Impersonation to Precipitate Fraud'. Mercer had claimed to be Jeremiah Miller's son, one Maximilian Miller, around the same time as the sudden return of one Raith Cornstone, a possibly legitimate claimant to a share in the Magic Patents Office. (This was in relation to events prior to the setting of conditions and

restrictions upon the Proprietorship of the Patents Office.) Although we have not been able to absolutely ascertain whether Jeremiah Miller had a son named Maximilian, the attempted deception was nevertheless proven. Byrne's request for a lower sentence in return for this information was denied.

***
31 July 1968 – SUPPLEMENTAL:

After a meeting of the full Magic Council and Senior War Cabinet, WFW, to discuss this Addendum, it was decided that as tragic as these acts and their repercussions were and are, their details are not to be revealed until the final declassification date has been reached. Permission is granted in advance for reparations to be made upon reaching this date, but only from funds, if any, seized from the enemy or enemies responsible – should they still be extant.

31 JULY 1968 – END FILE.'

* * * * * * *

There was silence in Professor Winch's office. To all present and for differing although connected reasons, what they had just read and heard was truly staggering.

Eventually, a white-faced Ezekiel Creek stood up and spoke. "Headmaster, this will take a long, long time for me to accept. It may be the truth, but my life for many years has been based on different truths. If you will excuse me." Professor Ezekiel Creek said nothing more, and just walked out of the office.

Anthony also remained silent, although he certainly felt regretful. He knew that as loyal as he was and is, if he had known of the decades of misery brought upon his colleagues, he might have tipped them the wink years before. Upon further reflection he was relieved that he had never had had to deal with such conflict.

Josh, also looking rather less than hale or hearty, finally spoke, while Professor Cornstone just looked down at the floor.

"Headmaster, I have been your friend and colleague for many years. We have been through many things together, and although it may seem odd for me to mention it, so has Cree – er – Ezekiel, and er – Edwin. WHY HAVEN'T YOU TOLD US ANY OF THIS LONG BEFORE NOW?!"

Professor Winch sighed, put his hands together and answered in a quiet, calm manner.

"I am awfully sorry, Josh, I am as astounded as you are. I myself was only given clearance to read that document myself this morning."

"BUT YOU ARE HEAD OF THE WFW! WHO WOULD HAVE STOPPED YOU?!"

"Josh, leaders who obey the law are true leaders. Leaders who do whatever

they like are dictators. Hopefully, I am not and never will be a dictator.

"I may have been privy to Anthony's clandestine operations and real identity, but that is all, but if a file is classified as '*Denied to all for seventy-five years*', that does include me, I'm afraid. I wasn't in the Senior War Cabinet at the time and I didn't even know the file existed until yesterday. However, what I propose to do now, is—"

"I'm sorry, Beecham," suddenly interjected Edwin, but looking up rather than at Josh.

"Pardon?" asked Josh.

"Years of bad blood. We were wrong, so very wrong – both of us, I'm sorry."

With that, Professor Cornstone got up, and he too left Professor Winch's office.

Josh and Anthony could only sigh and give a wan smile as their colleague left.

"You were saying, Headmaster?" asked Josh.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes, I'm afraid that it might not be much in way of compensation, but I will make enquiries on behalf of all three of you as to what can be reclaimed, and of course, from where and from whom. This is important, I know, but more importantly, I want you, and the others of course, to try and put this behind you and concentrate on the difficult tasks we all have ahead of us."

"Yes, Headmaster, you're right – as usual," said the still highly aggrieved but nevertheless unflinchingly loyal Josh Beecham.

"Count on me, old boy," said a breezy Anthony, at which Professor Winch just raised his eyebrows.

"Good! I always feel it is best to bring matters to a head earlier rather than later. As I have done this, it's now your turn. Is there anything either of you would like to discuss?" asked Professor Winch.

Josh immediately spoke up.

"Yes, Headmaster. This business about the Addendum to the Book of Chaotagens. Has there been any developments over it?"

While Anthony gave the briefest of smiles, Professor Winch scratched his head as if wondering what to say next. After a short pause he put his hands together, commenced his trademark finger twiddling, and replied.

"Josh, please believe me when I say that the angst you and many others endured over the Addendum was absolutely essential for a number of reasons, but the plain and simple truth is, there is no Addendum. It is a load of tripe I invented to further confuse the enemy and to encourage them to dissipate their forces. With Zenith and The League of Mordred spreading themselves too thinly, this delayed their chances of finding and releasing a Chaotagen."

Josh was dumbfounded. Most of his and Professor Creek's trip to Aberystwyth had been concerned with the retrieval and safe keeping of the Addendum. Then again, he thought, they had made Marco Dracov work

rather hard in his attempts to try and steal it.

However, now something else, although still strongly linked to this topic, was nagging at Josh. Then he remembered.

"Surely the wand itself is real, though? And if so, seeing as it was lost, or at least well hidden for centuries, how did the warlocks manage to find it?"

Professor Winch smiled, rather slyly.

"Oh, yes, the wand is real enough, and they did indeed find it again. As for how they managed to do so – I have absolutely no idea!"

The redoubtable Josh showed his ability to take disturbing news on the chin and quickly put the past behind him. He again broke out into a big grin, and burst into an uncontrollable fit of laugher, as did Anthony. It was so contagious it wasn't long before Professor Winch joined in.

"Ha ha ha! Hee hee! You know, gents – ho, ho, ho! I don't think Ezekiel – ha ha hee hee – is going to ta – ha ha ha! take this so ho ho ho! – lightly!" said Professor Winch, banging his fists on the table to try and control his fit of the giggles.

52

A Four-Legged Friend

PROFESSOR PENDRAGON was walking through the Hagelbarm Forest, a dense woodland area stretching right across the foothills of the Hagelbarm Mountains, deep in Romania. It was pitch black even though it was only 3:30 p.m. This was due to the thick canopy of the forest which made it seem as if it was the dead of night, even though the last of the autumnal sun was still shining on the open plains.

The elderly professor picked his way through the dense forest by using his wand as a torch, a bit like the warlocks with their battle-wands. He was trying to reach the Magic Kingdom of Grezjgenschtad. This was the homeland of Vlad the Impala and his thirty-thousand strong herd of magic beasts. They had fought many times over many years with different enemies, all of whom wanted to relieve the kingdom of its precious stones and minerals, embedded deep in the rocks of the Hagelbarm Mountains. These included the famed, unique and much desired (usually by enemies) '*Talking Crystals*', a type of quartz, not of any real value in mineral terms, but had their own mystical if not magical powers of being able to retain voices and sounds, and had indeed been used to record and keep for posterity, historical accounts telling the story of the magical Impalese nation.

The professor had visited Vlad on many occasions, but each time it was different. Grezjgenschtad was always moving. It did not matter if someone visited the place once a day, twice a day or every ten minutes, it could never be reached by the same route twice. This made it very difficult for Professor Pendragon, but he trusted in both his good friend Vlad, and to sheer luck that he would find it, and he usually did.

The professor groaned to himself as he saw the land rise before him. He was getting on in years and wizard or no wizard he found steep hills a bit of a struggle at his time of life. When looking for somewhere like Grezjgenschtad, resorting to magic travel did him no good whatsoever. Even with magic travel, one has got to know where one is going in the first place.

He sighed and resolved to make the steep climb.

An hour later he was at the top, looking down on the magic kingdom. Thousands of impalas were grazing along the valley in the pale September sunshine. Professor Pendragon smiled. He looked at a small gathering surrounding a small lake.

One of the impalas, the largest among them, looked up and saw the professor. He nodded his head, and snorted. This was all an impala could do to physically communicate, but these were magic beasts and they could communicate telepathically, but only with the most psychic of wizards.

"Hello again, my good friend. Glad you could find us."

"I always do, Vlad, I always do, eventually. . ."

"You look tired, Professor, I will send one of my lieutenants to fetch you. Rest for a moment, he will be with you shortly."

"Thank you, Vlad, that is very kind."

Professor Pendragon sat on an old tree stump and awaited his lift. The trusty lieutenant, Django, raced away along the valley and towards the professor, who smiled at such majesty and splendour.

However, moments later he noticed that Django was suddenly nodding his head and snorting repeatedly and was noticeably speeding up.

A voice filled the professor's head. "Professor! You are being watched by the enemy! Please do what you can to avoid capture, I am sending more troops to help."

Professor Pendragon stood up and span round, while at the same time he removed his wand from his coat pocket and fired off a stun-bolt. Considering the situation he found himself in there were three problems with this: firstly, a stun-bolt is the best that an ordinary everyday wand can manage in a battle situation; secondly, the professor is a lousy shot, at least with a wand, and finally one stun-bolt when seven warlocks and two of The League of Mordred are advancing on you, is not going to win the day.

A warlock battle-wand was raised and fired directly at the professor, but it was not a death-bolt as the professor was not killed, only knocked unconscious.

As Django and a troop of impalas reached the melee, they were felled by repeated death-bolts from the evil allies who had positioned themselves behind trees along the hilltop. Django and his troop all dropped dead on the ground, right by the unconscious professor.

Zezk came out from behind the overgrown schmurple bush and looked down on the deathly still Django. "Zat iz for my bruzzerz, you Imapaleze peeg!" He spat on Django and even walked over him to look down on the professor. He addressed his troops. "Qvickly! I do not vont battle viz ze entire Impaleze army. Get 'im up on zer, zen ve go!"

Their escape was going to be made by broomstick. The professor, whom they expected to be out for quite a while, was tied to a bamboo chair which was secured to eight broomsticks. Six were purely for support, while the remainder were for two warlocks to guide this airborne sedan chair to their base.

As Vlad and a troop of impalas arrived to try and rescue their friend, they were kept back by volley after volley of death-bolts. Another impala was killed, but Vlad, as all of his herd can do, used his antlers like a battle-wand. He managed to fell one of The League of Mordred, who are not quite as agile in the air as their warlock allies, but this was not enough. The enemy were soon up in the air and away, taking Professor Pendragon with them.

Vlad snorted repeatedly in anger, scraped his hooves along the ground, and directed his troops to return home.

*

Professor Winch had just said goodbye to his two remaining guests, Josh and Anthony. He put his hands behind his head and the good old days at Lesterjester University were slowly coming into focus.

"Professor Winch, can you hear me? This is of the utmost urgency!"

"Uh – eh? Wha-? Is that you, Barney? Is the sprunchfetter ready? Eh?"

"No, Professor, it is Vlad. I have some grave news for you."

Professor Winch yawned as he replied.

"He-hello, Vlad, sorry about that, I was just nodding off. What is it? What has happened?"

"I am very sorry to have to inform you that your good friend Professor Pendragon has been kidnapped by the warlocks. He was within sight of our encampment, but as he rested, waiting for one of my lieutenants to pick him up to bring him over to the herd, he was ambushed and taken. We did our very best to prevent this, but it was too late, they killed some of my troops before flying away. I really am sorry. I can only hope that he will escape or can be rescued."

Professor Winch did not reply straightaway, he couldn't; his face was ashen and his expression frozen – with horror. Eventually, he managed to utter his deep regrets upon hearing such dreadful news.

"I am truly sorry about your losses, Vlad, it grieves me greatly, and of course, I fear greatly for my old friend. To be captured by The League of Mordred is bad enough, but to be held prisoner and undoubtedly tortured by the warlocks is quite another. As tragic as this undoubtedly is, there is, however, still the matter of the Book of Chaotagens. Have you succeeded in driving out Zenith from your lands?"

"Rest assured, Professor, Zenith has been pushed back to the sea and is sailing back to England as we speak. There are one or two of his kind still here, they must have taken shelter in the warlocks' camp while their comrades were driven back. I should not concern yourself too much with them, I'm sure their leader has not left the book here for safe keeping."

"That is a great relief. At least the book and the wand are still thousands of miles apart, and Mike is safe for the moment . . . but poor Aloysius, he must have unwittingly passed the warlocks' camp while trying to find you."

"It would seem so. If only we had been able to reach him sooner he would have been safe. All I can do now is to offer you the services of my best troops, to aid you in any quest you may embark upon to rescue your friend."

"Thank you, Vlad, I know I can always rely on you. One thing that still puzzles me, though, what made you advance on the enemy so early? I was worried that Zenith may have returned before the warlocks had left."

"This was out of necessity, Professor. Since the demise of your unfortunate friend, Charles, Zenith's fortunes have changed considerably, at least here and throughout the Balkans. It would appear that those sent in to continue the production of sprunchfetters and schmurple bushes did not know what they were doing and production ground to a halt, causing Zenith to lose out

on millions. He obviously looked to the precious stones of Grezjgenschtad as an alternate source of income, and most worryingly, he was getting too good at guessing where my ever moving kingdom would be. We had to attack them before they pillaged our lands, but obviously he managed to pass on at least our general location to the warlocks before being forced out, hence today's tragic events.

"But still . . . I don't know if they were more looking for your friend and spotted our kingdom, or were looking for our kingdom and spotted your friend, but either way, they succeeded in both."

"Maybe they were looking for both all along, Vlad, but it doesn't seem to matter now, either way. And do be aware that the warlocks may well return in greater numbers. Which makes me even more sorry that due to this terrible happening, we cannot assist you just yet in setting a magic defence shield around your domain, but when we can we will indeed do so."

"I understand, Professor. And being honest, I suspect even that would not keep a determined enemy out forever, so do not worry too much on this."

"There may be something in that, unfortunately. Well, Vlad, thank you once again for all your help, but I have a great deal to do and just as much to think about . . . so, goodbye, old friend."

But Vlad did not want the call to end just yet.

"Professor, before you go, may I suggest something? It may help."

"Please do," said Professor Winch, while looking at his watch.

"Thank you, Professor. I know you are very busy, but please be patient as I am sure this will be of some help to you and your people. This is from records gleaned from the rock crystals in our Memory Cave at Van Daniken Creek. (Professor Winch sighed). If I seem to be, as humans call it, reading from a book, then they would be about right. It does not seem to be complete as it seems to begin some way in from the original account, but what there is, is, I think, informative enough. It is all to do with our old friend, Merlin, but not just him, but an evil count and his sorcerers from these lands. I will relate it to you, just as it has been recorded."

Professor Winch sighed once more. He had had long experience of dealing with Vlad the Impala when a bee was in his bonnet. He considered rudely terminating the call but thought better of it.

"Ready when you are, Vlad," said the professor, trying to inject sincerity into his voice and tone.

"Thank you, Professor. . ."

Vlad's voice now changed to a drear monotone as he began to relate his tale, verbatim from memory:

' . . . but the treacherous Merlin was himself tricked by Queen Guinevere's brother, Count Eric of Bucharest, a Balkan nobleman. He instructed his own powerful sorcerers to spy on Merlin, and soon they reported that Merlin was plotting against the king.

"Eric also learned of the Chaotagens and the Wand. Here was all the power he could ever dream of, but their secrets were deep in Merlin's mind. Here was Eric's, or rather his sorcerers' brilliant master stroke. They drugged Merlin one night and performed a spell which sent him, and them – back in time. They also made sure his memory went backwards. Merlin had no memory of writing the book or of making the wand, and so again set about his evil tasks anew. They drugged Merlin again, brought him back to his original timeline – and kept both the new wand and book. Merlin was blissfully ignorant of such events.

"But Eric did not realise the powers of the great sorceress, Morgana, fickle ally of Merlin and Mordred, or even Arthur while he was still alive, but only if such an alliance suited her purposes. Upon suspecting Count Eric of treachery, Morgana read his mind while he was asleep and soon knew everything he had done. In order to regain favour in Camelot, she told the Knights of the Round Table of all that she had learned.

"Eric, a power hungry usurper, had plans to return home and use such evil to become Emperor of the whole of the Balkan Region.

"But as Eric and his evil retinue tried to leave England, they were challenged by the goodly knights, now led by Sir Gawain upon Arthur's untimely death. In the desperate battle, eighteen of the knights and all but Eric himself from the enemy were killed. He took out the wand and the book to wreak havoc upon the world, but before he could utter the evil incantation, Sir Bernard of Bootle lunged at Eric and wrested the wand from him.

"An infuriated Eric struck out again and again, trying to kill Sir Bernard, but the brave Sir Fredwick of Seaforth stood between them, receiving terrible wounds but allowing Sir Bernard to work on and break the evil spell. The Knights of the Round Table destroyed these works of evil and saved England and the world. Sir Bernard vowed to face Merlin and kill him if necessary to ensure the destruction of the originals, but by then Merlin had made good his escape. . .'

As intelligent as Vlad was, he was not aware of the need or at least convention to indicate he had reached the end of an account, or even a good old fashioned yarn. But the awkward silence let Professor Winch know it was indeed over. Sadly, the professor was mystified as to why Vlad had thought it would be useful.

"Oh . . . er – facinating stuff, Vlad, but how on earth will this help me to defeat the enemy?"

"I have known you many years, Professor, I will ignore your scepticism."

"Again, I apologise, Vlad, but I am a very worried man and time is short."

"I did ask you to be patient, did I not? I first heard this tale many years

ago when I was taken to the Memory Cave by my father. The impalas of this land were once a royal and noble herd, and many of our number were given as gifts by more honourable noblemen than Count Eric, to their kinfolk in England. Some eventually returned to these lands and these bore many fascinating tales of both chivalry and treachery from the royal courts. Many of these tales were kept for posterity by using our own magic to embed them in the crystals in the cave walls. But more importantly I learned long ago of the terrible burden that weighs heavily upon the House of Pendragon, I know that while but one scion of this glorious dynasty lives and breathes, there is—"

"I already know this, Vlad, but—" interjected Professor Winch, but he was immediately countered by Vlad. "Patience, my friend, patience! Count Eric nearly brought ruin to the world through travelling back in time with Merlin, but was foiled by Sir Bernard, but you could end forever this terrible threat that hangs over the whole world. If you find and take Merlin far enough back in time, you could ensure the Chaotagens never come into existence. However, in the absence of the older Pendragon, you would need in his stead your young friend to set the Magic Seal of Arthur the True to prevent anyone from ever trying to conjure up such evil, ever again."

Professor Winch's state of frustration and impatience was gone in an instant. He brightened considerably as he mused on the suggestion put to him, but only for a second before a frown again covered his face.

"That is an excellent idea, Vlad, but if I acted upon it, it would unfortunately present me with another problem. The only way we can go back so far in time is to use the Time Crystals of Glastonbury. They were to be installed and set up to reinstigate the Magic Army. I would no doubt have a battle royal with the Council to get them to sanction such a change."

"I cannot help you to decide such things, Professor, or mediate in political battles with your friends. I can only suggest what I think is possible."

"You're a right Job's comforter, aren't you?" said Professor Winch, but without malice.

"But he overcame being stranded many months in the belly of a whale, did he not?"

"That was Jonah."

"Oh."

"But you are right, Vlad, it is my decision and mine alone. I have a great deal of thinking and heart searching to do. And with that I must go – thanks again, Vlad, I will be in touch soon. Goodbye for now, old friend."

"Goodbye, Professor, best of luck." Vlad was gone.

Professor Winch commenced to drumming with his fingers on his desk. He sighed, nodded, and then. . . "Mike? Are you there, Mike? Ah, good, good. There are a few things I need to talk to you about. . . "

An hour later, Mike was back in his room. He had heard Professor Winch's proposals, and the professor had not been shy in letting Mike know of the potential dangers and pitfalls, which if they came to fruition were likely to be

severe.

Right at that minute, Mike dearly wished he had not risen fifty feet in the air to save Donaldo's penalty all those years before. Despite being brave and wise for his age, he was still only a boy, and he dearly wanted to return to the safe, happy and secure life most boys of his age enjoyed: football, girlfriends, computers, music, DVDs, even if it meant the occasional blazing row with parents. It was all just too much and he burst into tears. He was immediately consoled by Marina, who held and hid Mike's tear stained face to her own.

Josh, who had come straight over, ignoring all warnings of the still unauthorised link between Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz, was standing in Mike's room, white-faced and not knowing what to say.

Mike's room door was closed, but his friends from Krickenstaltz were outside, and they too were very upset. Back in the room, Josh felt he had to say something.

"I'm very, very sorry, Mike, I really am. Last time I fought tooth and nail with Professor Winch to stop him using you. I hate to say it but on this occasion I can't see any other way."

Mike did not reply.

"Hang on," continued Josh, "I've an idea." He immediately transmuted straight back to Professor Winch, who was again in deep thought mode. "Professor, sorry for disturbing you, but we need to speak further."

"Josh, I'm not going to argue with you over this, I— "

"I know, I agree with you this time, but I have an idea: up until now, Mike has been in a highly vulnerable position, away from his friends and in the hands of the enemy. I think we owe it to him to give him the strongest protection we can. Your idea was for you and him to go alone back in time, I think that's wrong.

"Although it will take a great deal of magic energy to do it, I think Mike should go with me, and let's say, seven or eight of the adults he gets on with best. That way, he will not feel as if everything rests ultimately on his shoulders. I know it still may do, but it would not be so obvious to him."

Professor Winch's eyes flickered and he smiled.

"Do you know, I think I'm losing it. Twice in just a couple of hours I've been shown what to do by others. Best not tell old Horatio, eh? He'll have Beau in here before I had my wand packed. So, who do you have in mind?"

"Well, me and Ted, plus Franky, Ernst, Gregor, and Estella. And though it may seem strange, Professor Cornstone. This just might help him get back into things after today's events. Oh, and Big Bill, he seems a right one for the old camaraderie."

"Most are fine with me, but I'm not sure about Edwin at the moment."

"And why ever not, Headmaster?" said Professor Cornstone, breezing into the office.

"First of all, you probably haven't a clue as to what we have been discussing, and secondly, you're not back on the bottle, are you?"

"No I am not, Headmaster! But I am here to help, if you wish me to. By the way, I was eavesdropping, heard the lot. Everyone else does, so why not me, eh?"

Professor Winch tutted at Professor Cornstone. He sighed, and then gave an expression of resignation. He looked from one to the other, still uncertain of whether they should proceed, but then sighed again.

"If you are sure, that's it then."

"Er – not quite, Professor," said Josh, "to let Mike ease himself into things, we will all need a little time to bond together. I suggest we go back to Thornton for a few days, let Mike in on barracks life and so on. And don't forget, it will take a little time for you to find Merlin again as well as setting up the crystals. When you have them both ready, we'll briefly return to Krickenstaltz and then transmute to Glastonbury. What do you reckon?"

"You don't want much, do you?! And to think I was about to rip this up and tell them to take it back, but it looks like I'll have to pay up now!" It was the bill for the first payment on the brand new barrack house that had been ordered from the Magic Real-Estate Catalogue. "What are you waiting for?! A round of applause? Get going!"

A short while later a much happier Mike managed a smile as he saw the hubbub created by getting ready for a short break with friends. Although he did not realise it, Josh had caused absolute chaos deep in the lower dungeons of Krickenstaltz.

Despite being cleared by the WFW to make military transmutations as he saw fit, the elderly gentlemen had not envisaged that this would ever include the unauthorised arrival of a plethora of wizards, who were just as quickly to depart for a team building exercise in the northwest of England.

There was more frantic beard stroking, coffee cup banging and heart pill administering in one hour than there had previously been all year.

Mike still had to return to Krickenstaltz, quickly followed by a far more rigorous journey riddled with uncertainties, but he now accepted all this philosophically.

Mike surveyed his fellow team builders and smiled. He knew that Josh had hand-picked most of the same people that he would have chosen himself, although Professor Cornstone's inclusion was a mystery. He would have liked friends of his own age to be going too of course, but he knew that was not possible.

He immediately took a liking to Big Bill. Although he looked and sounded rough, his heart was in the right place.

It was going to be a multiple transmutation on Josh's wartime TMG.

Josh, cockerhoop over his winning over of Professor Winch, had then brow-beaten Professor Ren Stannich into letting Mike leave Krickenstaltz again.

All of the departees gathered in a circle with their number increased by one, as Jez Gildebrand had asked if he could go too. Everyone else Mike knew at Krickenstaltz crammed into the room to see them off, even Professor Ren Stannich, who was having second thoughts but couldn't do

anything about it.

"Ziss iz very irregular. I zink I 'ave been too hasty."

But Ren's voice was drowned out by the others shouting their farewells, and so the equally philosophical professor just shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Bye, Mike! Bye, everyvon! Best ov luck!"

"Aarrch, Schnorbitz!" said Marina, who jumped and clung on to Big Bill just before the merry troop disappeared.

"'Ello, darlin'! Come 'ere often?!" said Big Bill.

"Septimus? You had better fetch Engelbert. Oh, best bring his heart pills, if he has any left," said Professor Winch to his fellow Council member on the telemagickeraph.

53

A Team Building Event

PROFESSOR WINCH was once again alone in his office and was once more in deep thought mode. He was a very, very, worried man indeed. He had just had the worst row ever with two of his fellow members of the WFW Council, Septimus Twigg and Engelbert Osbaldeston. On this occasion they had not backed down through finally seeing the greater wisdom of their leader.

Firstly, the two grandees had had their feathers ruffled by what they considered to be serious and unjustifiable disturbances in the levels of magic energy emanating from Krickenstaltz, the root cause of which was, of course, the highly irregular transmutations made in relation to the seemingly extravagant, and to some (Septimus and Engelbert), downright irresponsible team building event planned by Josh Beecham.

Professor Winch had also put Professor Ren Stannich in rather a tight spot. He was the one who had made the adjustments upon tiring of the repeated pleas by Josh to do just that, after he had been given the initial go ahead from Professor Winch.

However, it had not been the creation of a few extra trillion Magi-therms to power transmutations for an awayday special which had caused such a row. Usually with the two seeming curmudgeons of the WFW, two hastily stroked beards and Septimus banging his coffee cup hard down on the table was the limit of their anger – usually – followed by smiles all round. There were, however, no such smiles this day. Professor Winch had added insult to injury by suddenly suggesting a change in plans concerning the Time Crystals of Glastonbury.

It had previously been agreed that the Time Crystals – a separate yet more potent magic power than the inherent magic of Krickenstaltz but which still had the WFW as its guardians, would be utilised for the urgent re-instigating of the Magic Army. But Professor Winch then pressed for a change in tactics, to instead use them to take the infamous, inconsistent and sadly sometime evil wizard Merlin, back in time to undo at least some of his treachery, taking one of the only two known surviving scions of the House of Pendragon along with them. He had naively thought that his two old friends would have realised the need for this change and would have agreed to it, but they most certainly had not.

It might have been possible for Professor Winch to bring the two grandees around to his way of thinking, if he had engaged in diplomacy and had explained and discussed his new proposals in a calm and reasonable manner. However, the bee-in-a-bonnet version of Professor Winch is more likely to ride roughshod over such niceties, and in doing so now had brought about

this tense and unpleasant state of affairs.

Upon eventually being told rather than asked, Septimus and Engelbert had retaliated by threatening to convene an extraordinary meeting of the full WFW Council, with a view to censuring Professor Winch, and maybe even removing him from office. The two grandees and their maverick leader were now at a serious impasse.

Although finding it difficult to do so, Professor Winch tried to concentrate on the matters at hand and deal with any political problems later.

Firstly, he needed to find Merlin as soon as possible. Even minus a qualifying Pendragon, finding this sometime evil genius from the dark ages was top priority. Although Mike was currently in the frame, either of the two Pendragons could be collared later, after Professor Winch had gleaned whatever information and possible help it was possible to obtain from the old sorcerer. He envisaged this as being at best a very difficult task, at worst a pointless one. In either event he would certainly need help. But who could possibly help him now?

Ezekiel couldn't. It was an unbreakable golden rule of golden rules that the Head and Deputy were never to be absent from the school at the same time during the school week. Even joint absences at other times were frowned upon but occasionally tolerated. Unfortunately, the task in hand was not something which could easily be allotted a time frame which fitted in nicely with the school curriculum.

Beauregard Fenmarsh would have been a reasonable choice given the circumstances, but Professor Winch had not long been informed that Beau had broken his leg. This was after falling off – a mop. He had been invited to a party by his perfectly non-magic neighbours. By the end of the night he unfortunately had had far too much to drink. He slurred his farewells, grabbed what he thought was his broomstick from a cupboard, and dashed upstairs to the attic. He then climbed through the skylight, clambered out on to the roof, mounted the mop, kicked off – and fell fifty feet down on to the garden below, as non-magical mops tend to do when used in this manner. 'Ugh! Ow!' and a sickening crunch let his hosts know that their very merry yet highly bizarre guest needed an ambulance. Perhaps it was just as well Beau had had to be overlooked in this instance, thought the professor. He mused on what would have no doubt been a battle royal with Mr Mainbrace to get him to again agree to release Beau from his daily duties, if the young alderman had been fit and well.

As for other possible candidates, Professor Winch knew that a fair few of the newly formed Irregulars were not of a sufficiently robust constitution to take on this particularly arduous task; frustratingly, most of those that did had all been whisked away by Josh. He now had grave doubts as to the wisdom of having let him do this. He sighed at the thought of them all running around a farmer's field with paint guns, while a very real war was beginning to rage. Professor Winch let this matter rest for the moment.

There was also the warlocks to consider. These pseudo-mediaeval fiends

were holding and maybe even torturing his good friend Aloysius. Professor Winch gave a deep sigh. He knew time was of the essence here, but he was very aware it could easily turn out to be time he has not got. He was very thankful that at least his good friend and ally, Vlad the Impala, was on hand to assist should there be any developments in any quest to find and rescue the elderly professor.

Finally, his old adversary Zenith himself, forced to return to a country that did not want him, and with his forces having recently taken several severe beatings. But Professor Winch was not complacent over this. He knew that Zenith and his evil brethren would regroup and probe for weaknesses in the magic community's armour, as well as trying to unite the deadly elements of chaos.

As Professor Winch pondered over these many problems, something more positive came into his mind; the furrowed brow and worried countenance slowly gave way to hope. He began to smile, gave a little laugh, and poured himself a brandy, a large one. Not all of his eligible Irregulars had gone off awaydaying. . .

He spoke down the telemagickeraph.

"Anthony, I'm so sorry to disturb your fishing, but I need to see you."

A few moments later. . .

"Sorry to disturb your well-earned leisure time, my friend, but I need to ask you something."

Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne, sporting a heavy raincoat, a big floppy hat and a pair of waders, gave a wry smile. He thought that like Estella, he had finally come in from the cold, but he suspected that things were going to get very frosty again. Similar to Josh, Ezekiel, and yes – even Professor Cornstone, most of the time – his sense of duty embiggened his mind and his spirit, allowing him to freely bow to the greater wisdom of his leader.

"Ask away, Headmaster, ask away."

"A bit boring this fishing lark, isn't it?"

Anthony smiled. He was well used to Professor Winch's crafty preludes.

"What do I have to do, then, Headmaster?"

"Well, Anthony, or rather, Anton. . . ?"

"I thought so. Back in disguise, eh? When, where, and why, Headmaster?"

"Tonight – Romania. I need to find Merlin, that's our most important task. However, if time allows, we can perhaps try and locate Grezjgenschtad and assist in rescuing Professor Pendragon. If we are successful in this, then seeing as Mike is currently living it up in Thornton, Aloysius can set the magic seal instead."

"I thought you were a bit lenient myself there, Professor. Josh can be rather cavalier at times, can't he? And Merlin, you say – that old fraud? I thought he'd gone to his maker years ago."

"You could actually be right there, Anthony, he is, or was, very ill, but I am hoping he is still with us. If he is and he agrees to help, then I may have a pleasant surprise for him."

Professor Winch stood, walked over to a cupboard, opened it and pulled out two items, one of which he shielded from Anthony's view.

"Ah, ginger snaps. Will you join me?" said Professor Winch, retaking his place behind his desk.

"Have I missed something, Headmaster? Why do you need to find him at all?"

"Ah, yes, you missed the fun, didn't you? While you were out trying to catch Jaws Five, I made several changes to my plans, and managed to cause a serious row with the Council. . . "

Professor Winch went on to explain everything that Anthony had missed since going off fishing.

Although different in many ways, Anthony was very like Josh when it came to a sense of duty. Like Josh (most of the time), he hardly ever doubted his leader, and even when he did he still gave him respectful latitude. He took everything on board calmly and smiled every so often, especially at the thought of his assistant, Big Bill Dooley going off with the gang to Thornton.

As Professor Winch summed up, Anthony nodded to both acknowledge and agree to the changes proposed.

"Vlad's gaff, eh? It'll be my pleasure, boss, but there is one thing that puzzles me: what is the point of my becoming Lieberman again? The warlocks blew my cover and you can bet your life Zenith knows. As it happens, he was beginning to suspect me, those blue needle mists were getting worse."

"Yes, yes, I did realise that, but I am very relieved to say that my alter ego, Mr Ronaldo Blipp, is still held in the highest esteem by Mr Z. Even more so when I bring back a prisoner and traitor to the cause, one Anton Lieberman. . . ? You may be compromised in one sense, but I don't think they know the real Anthony."

"But Zenith is surely back in Britain by now. Why would you take a prisoner to Romania?"

"Because Ronaldo Blipp doesn't know about recent events, does he? I will present myself with you in tow, at the warlocks' camp. The trouble here is, Kerantzky knew of Blipp but I'm not sure if this new fella does. It's a gamble, it always is, but I think it's worth a try."

"Very vell, zen, Profezzor, I vill go and getten ze ready – yez?"

"That's the ticket!" said Professor Winch.

The team builders found themselves in the meeting room of their magically constructed army barracks. Josh looked uneasily at Professor Cornstone. This wasn't a military operation and Professor Cornstone had not been asked along to lead them all, only to join in.

"Don't worry, Beecham, I know the score. After today, I just need to relax, read a bit, and get my head round everything."

The remainder, without a real task in hand, stood around awkwardly not knowing what the next move should be, but the homeliness of Big Bill Dooley

was soon to show itself as an undoubted asset.

"Come on, folks! We's on our 'olidays, or sorta! Come on, let's get some char and biccies and have a good ole' chinwag around the table."

This stirred everyone into action. The ladies, this time ably assisted by Mike and the Morse boys, soon put together some tea, chocolate cake and biscuits, and very soon all were gathered around the big oak table.

"So if we are in Thornton again, does this mean we are somewhere near the Steed and Vine? I did ask Barry Wimpole the other day and he said it was in Cornwall, but it didn't seem that far away," asked Gregor.

Those who knew of Barry's impish sense of humour smiled at Gregor's gullibility, but Big Bill came to the rescue. "Not far at all, me ole' pal. It's just up the top o' this road, turn left, along the lane past the cemetery, and bingo, there it is. But you's best askin' this young lady 'ere, I fink she's from round 'ere, if memory serves."

"That's a coincidence, isn't it? Maybe you can show us around the place, Estella?" asked Gregor.

"I'd love to, if that's OK with Josh, but we may not be allowed to go far from here."

"Officially, no, but I've done a little tinkering. We should be OK anywhere from Thornton all the way up to Sefton, maybe even a tad further. . ." said Josh.

"I would avoid Septimus Twigg for a while, Josh, he's upset enough," said Estella, half joking, half serious. "But OK, I'll show you around later . . . and I suppose it's safe enough to call in at my house now?" Josh just smiled and nodded.

"Goodo!" said a jaunty Ernst.

"Smashin!" said Gregor.

"You cheeky so and so!" said Big Bill in top gear for joshing and back slapping.

"Ow!" said Gregor.

Mike was just sitting there, smiling. It felt great to be in such good company. He wasn't saying much but was happy to be listening in on such inane but delightful nonsense.

Even Professor Cornstone was happy just to sit and listen, especially to the tall stories emanating from Big Bill about life in the East End of London.

" . . . So I sez, 'Yeah?! Wharra are you gonna do about it?!' 'N' the geezer sez, 'Nuffin', so I sez 'Fair enuff'. Any'ow, I shud a listened. Nex' fing is, me 'ead smashes in to the cross section of a bridge and then I cudn't ger art o' the stupid fing! That's the las' time I ever go on the toytown train ride wiv me nefew. The embarrasin' fing is, I 'ad to walk all the way to ozzy wiv the carriage stuck to me backside. Flippin' terrible!"

What followed was the loudest laughter Mike had ever heard, not just from Bill laughing at his own yarn, but from all of our happy team builders. The repartee went on for a good hour, and even Mike felt confident enough to give them all a laugh at his ignominious impersonation of a snowman on that

January day in his local park.

Professor Cornstone's eyes lit up at hearing this.

"You must be a spy after all, Miller. Didn't you say you – came in from the cold. . . ?"

The room went silent.

Next thing is, to very loud jeers from Big Bill and even Jez who was settling into the routine nicely, Professor Cornstone was bombarded with ginger snaps, some of which were soggy from being dunked. "Ow! Ow! Ow!" exclaimed the professor, as he was hit in the face by those that weren't. "I'm going to finish my newspaper!" he added, as he stormed off to the sitting area at the far end of the room.

"Right!" said Ted. "What's next?"

Gregor and Ernst were about to remind Estella that they wanted to see Thornton, but Mike suddenly shouted, "I know! Let's go in the tunnel!"

"Yer what, Mike? Yer gone nuts or summat?" asked a mystified Big Bill.

"No no, listen. When I was taken by the warlocks to the Steed and Vine, we went by a secret tunnel underneath the house. We came out about a mile or so away from the pub, but I believe it goes on to Sefton. Why don't we all do that together?"

"Sorry, Mike, you've forgotten one thing. This is a brand new house, the old one's gone. We won't be able to find the tunnel," said Franky.

"That's what I thought at first," said Mike, "but the new fireplace is in exactly the same position as the old one. The entrance should still be there."

"How big is the tunnel, Mike?" asked Franky. "Can we walk along it easily? The reason I ask is, most tunnels underneath old houses were built rather hastily, and the person using it, usually an escaping priest, would have to crawl along. I don't think we would fancy that."

"Oh, yeah," said Mike, suddenly remembering. "Kerantzky performed a spell to make us all smaller, that's why we could all walk along it. Oh well, forget that, then."

"Maybe I can 'elp you zer, Mike. Ze spell ov Kerantzky'z, did 'e say Zazzenfavver, or zumzing like it?" said Marina.

"Yes! Yes he did! Why, do you know it?!"

"No," said Marina, and took another biscuit and started talking about lace curtains to Estella.

"Don't be mean! Put him out of his misery!" said Estella.

"Ov courze I know it! If you vish to go in ze tunnel, I vill 'elp."

Mike lowered his head, put on a pathetic face and looked appealingly round the room.

"Sorry, youngun, I'se just promised this beer barrel 'ere a game o' darts in the Dog 'n' Cockroach," said Big Bill, to which Jez Gildebrand pulled a face, feigning insult.

"Don't you mean the Dog and Duck?" asked Professor Cornstone, looking up from his newspaper.

"Yoo's never been the East End, I takes it?" replied Big Bill.

"Sorry, Mike, the rest of us want to go for a walk around the place," said Estella, but on hearing this, Gregor looked a little awkward.

"Er – this sounds like fun, you don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. I'll have Marina to chinwag with," replied Estella.

"I iz zorry, Ezzie, but I like ze idea ov ze tunnel az vell."

"And so do we!" said Franky, speaking for himself and his brother.

Professor Cornstone was still sitting reading his paper, but buried his head even deeper, muttering, "Decisions, decisions. Couldn't organise a booze up in a brewery."

"I fort the sayin' was a pi—"

"Bill!" said Estella.

"Sorry, darlin'," said Big Bill.

The Professor ruffled his newspaper.

"Whatever and wherever you lot are doing and going, go and do it! Maybe then I can finish my crossword!"

No-one even looked in his direction.

First of all, Jez and Big Bill Dooley left for the pub, and then Estella and Ernst departed on their sightseeing tour. This left the amateur tunnellers. They waited impatiently on Marina to sort out her version of the spell, which would allow them all to walk along the tunnel rather than crawl.

However, it wasn't just the crossword solving grump who had declined to go on any of the three excursions currently on offer, there was one other, but this person did not have the slightest intention of staying behind to help crack twelve down or eighteen across.

"See you all later!" said Josh, feigning breeziness but not quite managing it, and without saying where he was going, he left the barrack house.

All but Mike were too busy telling Marina to hurry it along to notice, but Mike knew something was not quite right. He waited for Marina to finish explaining some particularly boring aspect of the spell.

"Won't be a minute, I need to see Josh about something."

Mike dashed out the door, thinking Josh would be quite a way away, but there he was, leaning on the fence, looking dolefully down the row of houses along Walkells Road.

"Josh, is there something wrong?"

Josh turned to look at Mike and there was a tear in his eye.

"No, Mike, I'm all right," he said, rather pathetically.

Mike was not fooled in the least. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what is wrong."

"I just feel a bit daft, Mike, that's all. I never mentioned this earlier, but like Estella, I'm from Thornton as well, originally. I spent many happy years here when I was younger, so I guess I'm just sad that those days have gone. See these houses? I had many friends who lived here. We played football every night, mostly ordinary folks, you see. And we messed about in this very field, especially at harvest time. And the daftest thing me and my mate Timothy ever did. . . "

Josh went on to explain all about an episode from when he and his friend Timothy Irons were eight years old. They had decided to walk along a remote country lane, late on a January afternoon to go brass rubbing in Sefton Church graveyard. This was about two miles from their homes.

The trouble with January afternoons is, they quickly become cold, dark, January evenings. In a matter of minutes, the pale sun which had kept them feeling safe, had disappeared. Josh and Timothy found themselves in a pitch black, freezing cold graveyard, with a scary walk back along an unlit country lane out in the wilds as their only means of getting home.

Although absolutely terrified, they set about their nightmare return. Each flutter of wings of an unseen bird, the contrasting wet-sparky-fizzling and low-pitched humming sounds of the electric pylons in the rain, the splashes from the frogs in the ditches; each made the boys jump out of their skin, or it felt like it.

As they neared home they could hear their names being called out into the dark night by their worry-stricken families. A little later, both boys were being called markedly different names.

"That was one scary experience, I can tell you, Mike. Mike?"

"Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Wha-what were you saying?"

"You, my lad, are getting cheekier by the day! I should have left you with Kerantzky!"

"You've already said that."

"Have I? Must be losing the old repartee. Getting older, Mike, it'll happen to you one day."

"So, you lived here, eh? Where was your house, then?"

"Oh, a little further over into the estate, Burnt Cottage Street it was – number thirty. I might bimble along there in a mo. Fancy it?"

Mike was in two minds. He really did want to walk along the tunnel, especially as it would be with friends this time around, but he also wanted to be with Josh and see his old haunts.

But putting Marina to so much trouble swayed his mind.

"I think I'd better go, it was my idea after all. Why don't you come with us, and tomorrow we can have a look around the place?"

Josh thought for a moment.

"No, you go back in, Mike, before they zoom off without you. I really want to have a look around now. I'll be all right, honest."

"OK, fair enough. Bye then, see you later."

"Yeah, bye, Mike. Don't get lost now!"

Mike turned and waved, and went back in to a variety of complaints about being kept waiting.

A few minutes later, Josh looked over and smiled as he saw the whole barrack house light up, followed by cheers from Marina's highly impressed audience. Josh leapt over the fence and walked down Walkells Road.

As he reached number twenty-two, Estella's house, he stopped, put his hands on the brick wall at the front of the garden, sighed, and went to walk

on, but he stopped again and put his hands to his ears.

"Josh Beecham! Do not renege on our friendship now! We all have regrets and we just have to live with them. Come on in, the kettle's on, and Ernst is waiting to hear all about you and Timothy!"

It was of course, Estella. Josh stood there for a moment in thought, but then gave a finalistic sigh as if he had finally come to terms with the past.

Josh jumped over the little wall, knocked on the door, and within a couple of minutes had Ernst and Estella laughing about cold January nights, and warm September days covered in hay, which all invariably ended with the archetypal red-faced farmer swearing at the hordes of children from the neighbouring estate, which of course included our two childhood playmates not yet sweethearts. Josh even owned up to Estella that he was the one who had booed the whole way through the school drama group's production of The Mikado, which Estella was appearing in. This was at the opening day's show of its week long run at their local primary school. But Josh was duly collared, and as a punishment he had had to endure detention as a stage hand for the rest of its run.

After the fun had died down, both Josh and Ernst noticed that Estella was a little upset. On this occasion Josh deliberately did not offer a consoling hug, instead letting Ernst be the first to ask what the matter was. Estella wiped her eyes.

"I'm sorry, you two, I just couldn't help it. With all this reminiscing, I remembered that I used to help out with the horses at Nellis's Farm. Not content with murdering Hillary, that pig Lieberman killed the kindest, sweetest old couple you could ever wish to meet. And how is he being punished for his crimes? By being treated like a trustee at an open prison! Not only did he leave Professor Winch's office – unguarded, but he went straight off and got togged up like a country toff and took himself off fishing! The cocky bastard!"

Josh smiled. And although not cleared to do any such thing, he thought it timely for Estella to hear an explanation of some recent and other not so recent events. And after all, he thought, what he was going to say would soon be public knowledge anyway.

"Er – Estella, you know Lieberman . . . "

As Josh related all the behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings, or at least as much as he felt able from what he now knew himself, Estella learned that Leiberman had not killed anyone she had ever cared about.

". . . Oh dear," sighed Estella, "and I smacked him in the face about ten times! I shall have to apologise. And the police cars and the sirens – all a set up? But what about those two guarding the farm, they must have been real?"

"It all had to look realistic," said Josh. "The two were real policemen and they really did believe that the old couple had been murdered. It made it easier all round."

"And the Nellis's are alive and well?"

"Yep. They were given a bundle of money and sent on holiday until things are straightened out."

But – whether it was Zenith, or Kerantzky, or a henchman from either camp, someone had very definitely killed her friend Hillary. With the vision of her friend's crumpled lifeless body again fresh in her mind, Estella's face went white and her eyes glistened over once more. Josh and Ernst remained silent for the moment, allowing Estella to recover her composure in her own time. The resiliant spy soon came round.

"Thank goodness for that, but the odd thing is, I knew Big Bill was a plant. I was never told officially, of course, then or later, but I've known a long time.

"One day – oh, years and years ago now, he saw me with Forgetful Jones having a coffee in Waterloo. Bill walked past the cafe window with none other than Professor Zenith. He just happened to glance in, saw me, walked on, then he must have said he was thirsty or something and so walked back and came in to the cafe. After ordering a Pepsi, he barely turned his head and whispered, ''Op it, darlin', right now, take 'im wiv yer. If that nutter ahtside sees you wiv 'im, 'e'll kill the bofe ov yer. Now no questions – git.'"

Her listeners smiled at the razor sharp take-off of Big Bill. This was duly noticed by Estella and she smiled back before continuing.

" . . . I didn't need telling twice, and although I was shaking like a leaf, I dragged FJ out of the cafe and we dashed back down South Road and hopped on the L3. From then on I realised Big Bill was on our side. It turned out that he knew, that Zenith knew, that Forgetful Jones was one of us. Bill's warning not only saved FJ and me, but as Zenith never caught sight of either of us in Waterloo at all that day, it meant I could be used as a double agent sometime later. So that's how I know all about Big Bill, but I would never in a million years have thought Lieberman to be truly loyal to the WFW. Just goes to show, eh?"

After an uncertain reply of 'Nor me' from one and a hesitant, wistful 'Yeah' from the other, all three knew it was time to forget about such unpleasantness and return to having some fun.

Estella could smile again.

"Let's listen to some old stuff – eh – roll back the years?"

Estella dragged an old record player out from behind the TV, rummaged in a box next to the sofa and found an old LP of Fifties rock 'n' roll music.

As the three friends strolled down memory lane, Jukebox Jiving away, Mike and the others were some way into their adventure in the tunnel.

"Where did you say it goes on to, Mike?" asked Ted, after the tunnellers had been walking for about forty-five minutes.

They had reached the now crumbling and collapsing makeshift exit Mike and the warlocks had scrambled up and out of while en route to the Steed and Vine.

"I'm not absolutely certain, as last time we climbed out here, but I think I

heard someone say it goes on to Sefton Church," said Mike.

"Yes, of course, should have known." said Franky, suddenly remembering. "Ted and I had read up on it at school and so we drove up there a couple of years back. We were going to go in as we'd been told it was never used much these days, just our luck there was a wedding on."

"I'd forgotten about that!" said Ted. "So we're off to try again, eh? Very good. Right then, everyone, who's for some bells and smells?!"

In reply came smiles rather than smells, and of course, general agreement to this novel idea. With wands once more held high so as to light their way, they resumed their underground ramble and made their way on to Sefton Church.

The Local History class from a nearby night school had kindly been given permission by the Reverend Waldrom to do some brass rubbing in the church.

A little old thin man by the name of Bert Harrop took the evening's class. He and his students were all assembled in the narthex foyer.

"OK, everyone, there are plenty of tombs inside to choose from, so take your wax and paper and begin. I'll come around later to see how you are doing. I'm just going for a quick glass – er – Theology class with the Reverend."

The class entered the main part of the church and split up. They each chose a different tomb from which they would create their brass rubbings.

Elsie Milchester, a dotty spinster, was soon busy rubbing away with her wax on the tomb of Sir Edgar Harkins, Magistrate of Lunt and Sefton in the late seventeen-hundreds. Elsie found the task harder than she had thought it would be, as the wax was difficult to control. She soon concluded that the piece of wax she was using was too large for her maiden's hands and so decided to break some off.

Our merry tunnellers had reached a crossroads, as there were now different smaller tunnels to the left and right of the main path. They noticed that each side tunnel had wooden slats on the walls and metal plates and grills overhead, and as Mike, Marina and Gregor had been getting historical nuggets from Ted and Franky as they had walked along, they all now settled on these being a maze of entrances and exits, some of which were, perhaps, alternate rat-runs and some total dead-ends, no doubt built to confuse the King's men and maximise the chances of escape for the terrified clergy during the purges of the Reformation.

As they continued to walk along, a side tunnel to the left seemed to be the one most likely to connect with the church itself somehow, as it was on the ascent, although at not too friendly a gradient. As odd as this looked, it was at least a way of going up, if they could manage it. Ted scrambled through and up the small entrance, and then stopped and shouted for Franky to come and help him.

At that moment, his brother was checking out a decent looking opening to

the right of the main tunnel. At the end of this was a metal grill up in the roof, but despite his best efforts it just wouldn't shift. He gave it up as a bad job and went to join Ted. This was just as Elsie, directly above, tried to break her slab of wax in half on the iron tomb.

Thud, thud, thud, went Elsie with the wax.

"All right! I can hear you! I'll be up to join you in a minute," said Franky to Ted.

Elsie froze, and fainted. This was out of view of all the other class members, but thankfully it happened just as Bert was strolling back into the church. He saw Elsie and rushed over and checked her pulse. He sighed with relief, but just as a precaution put her in the recovery position. He then gently coaxed Elsie back to consciousness and helped her to the nearest pew.

Although he was expecting as much, Elsie, once she had recovered enough, told Bert about the ghost she had just heard. An understanding Bert nodded, as he had done on so many prior occasions.

"Elsie, how many times must we go through this? The doctor said you must face your fears, that is why you joined our little society, remember? The acoustics in this place create all sorts of strange sounds. It was probably the cleaner talking to the verger and it's echoed in here."

"Yes, yes, you are quite right, Mr Harrop, how silly of me, but my, oh my, that seemed so real!"

Unfortunately, the tunnellers were being frustrated in their efforts so far. They had not done anything but hit various dead-ends, or perhaps even red herrings, as it was difficult for them to know if the various grills or grids they could see above some of the side tunnels had originally been designed to be removed or not. They could not be sure if they had been part of an intricate escape plan, or were indeed just plain ordinary ventilation grids. Of those they had tried so far, all had seemed to be totally and utterly immoveable. This may have been due to design, but just as easily it could have been the result of nothing more than the ravages of time, but a magic solution, usually unavoidably dramatic, was out of the question, due to not knowing what exactly was what up in the church.

Meanwhile, Elsie now felt well enough to go back to the task in hand. She placed the paper sheet over the metal face of Sir Edgar and began applying pressure with the wax, hoping to get at least a reasonable mid-relief rubbing which would complement her little collection of counter-relief rubbings. As the nose was rather difficult to get right as the paper kept slipping down, she sprinkled talc over it in the hope it would increase adhesion.

"Don't do that! You'll make me sneeze!" said Gregor to Marina, who had sprayed au de cologne to try and disguise the rather sewery smell down below in the tunnel.

After her second fainting fit but with a more awkward fall to the stone floor of the church, Elsie, while holding a handkerchief to her head, was given a lift by the verger to the nearest A & E department.

"Silly woman," muttered the occasionally unsympathetic Bert Harrop, after Elsie and the verger had rushed out of the door.

Thankfully it was a quiet night in Casualty: no drunks, and just a few minor injuries. Elsie was soon checked over: sore, bruised, a little blood – now congealed and scabby, but nothing at all to worry about. Not too long after that, Elsie was back home with nothing but paracetamol and a glass of water for company, and vowing never to go to Sefton Church, ever again.

Bert then came across Nancy Green, stalwart of the class, who was working on the tomb of Sir Charles Fincham, a local-born Knight of the Crusades. He had died overseas but his wish to be buried in his own home parish had been faithfully carried out by his squire and friends.

Nancy noticed that the sides of the tomb were just as ornately engraved as the lid, and stood and mused on the best way to make any rubbings. She knew that most upright engravings on most metals or stones were relatively easy to get decent rubbings from, but equally she knew it was not always the case. Sir Charles's tomb had a generously overhanging lid, unusual but not unknown. She finally decided on her course of action.

Nancy scoured around the church until she eventually found some old hymn books. She unfurled her expensive roll of all-rag paper by about a foot or so, and placed the opened section on top of the tomb. Nancy then stacked the hymn books on top of the flat section of paper and carefully let the rest of the roll drop down. She then unrolled the paper a little more so as to generate a little slack, which was then pushed gently up to the top and into the space under the overhang of the lid. The paper now covered a small section of the ornate marble design in low-relief, which ran along the bottom of Sir Charles' tomb. The tableau depicted several scenes from the knight's heroics in the Second Crusade. Nancy secured the paper with her left hand, leaving her right hand free to hold her ball of wax and make the rubbing.

"Excellent work, my dear, as always. . ." said Bert with a smile, as he walked off to continue his rounds. But as Nancy started forcefully rubbing her wax over the paper. . .

"You touch my arse again with that thing and you're for it," said Franky, trying to see if a metal grill overhead could be moved, only to be accidentally prodded in the rear by a wand, courtesy of Ted who was right behind him.

Bert Harrop turned back around after hearing a low groan. He came across Nancy, now also out cold on the floor. Just as he had done so for Elsie, Bert performed his usual first-aid with consummate ease, and then helped Nancy into a pew after she had eventually come round. Thankfully, Nancy had not landed heavily or with a bump, but had gently slid down the side of the tomb. She was flustered and hot, but otherwise fine.

"Oh, dear," said Bert quietly to himself, after hearing Nancy's equally strange account of ghosts down below. "At this rate I won't have any class left to teach."

Bert suggested to Nancy that if she felt strong enough, it might be best if she too went home. A white-faced Nancy just nodded. Bert sighed and

walked on, believing it an impossibility to have three hyper-neurotic women in one class, with his favourite student surprisingly among them.

"And what about you, young lady? I'm very glad to see the youth of today taking such an interest. How are you getting on?"

It was young Heather Watson, wearing what looked like a tea cosy on her head, a jumper that looked as if she'd stolen it from DJ Noel Edmonds in his heyday, a skirt that would have been rejected by Kylie Minogue for being too short, and a pair of wooly tights, nine sizes too big.

"Er – well – Mr 'Arrop, not too good I don't fink. Nuffink's 'appenin."

"Maybe it's the wax you are using. Let me see, if I may. . . ?"

"What wax is that then, Mr 'Arrop? I'se got this piece of brass 'ere, if that's what yer means?"

"Heather, dear, brass rubbing is just a term to mean – er – er. . . "

Bert looked at Heather, just chewing away on her gum, blowing bubbles, and not having a clue as to what she was supposed to be doing or what he was trying to say.

"Keep trying, my dear, I'm sure you'll get the hang of it."

The subterranean awaydayers, as far as they could tell, had exhausted all other possibilities for getting up into the church. They were now right underneath what appeared to be their very last chance. However, even if they had found the only way up and in, they had hit a snag. They could see the grill above, larger than the others they had seen so far and which they reckoned or at least hoped, could be the one. The trouble was, the grill was not just immediately above their heads on the tunnel roof, but about twenty feet further up, set across the top of what looked like an organic chimney or flue.

It was frustrating for them all. They were not here to either steal or vandalise, nor even to give anyone a scare, but if it was empty, and getting in and out was straightforward, then they would be at least glad of a quick look around this historical Merseyside landmark. The more conventional method of making a visit to a church was of course, denied them at the minute: changing back to full size while in the tunnel would be suicidal. Mike had even made the common sense suggestion of coming back tomorrow, at their normal size, and as perfectly normal legitimate visitors. The answer to this from the other four had been strangely united: 'Naah!' – which a smiling Mike had correctly translated as actually meaning, 'Where's the fun in that?!' Ideally they needed a ladder, or even ropes and a bucket, in fact anything which seemed remotely useful would be worth a try. There was, or more accurately, there had been a ladder, but what was left of it was now just sodden strips of rotted wood and wouldn't even stand the weight of a small child.

"Right, folks, welcome to the Last Chance Saloon. This is either our way in or it's the end of the line. If it is just another dead-end, then it's back the way we came. Even if it is a way in, then we would all still have to get up there. . ." said Ted, pointing up at the grill.

"Now I've an idea. I am sure that the barrack house must have some emergency stores of some kind, which must surely include a ladder, so I think it's worth going back to check this out. If there is, or anything we can use at all, we'll be back with it as soon as possible, if not, we'll see what spells we can use to rustle up something suitable, but as this is an excursion and not work, I am sure we would all agree we should not use magic if it can be avoided. We can at least do what we're all best at, once we're back up top.

"Seeing as it's my idea, then I'm definitely going, and if I take two of you with me, that should be enough. But of course, someone will have to stay with Marina," added the chivalrous Ted. "Anyone?"

Although the Romanian spinster was very modern in some ways, she was also old fashioned in others. The reverting back to being one of the fairer sex for this particular exercise was of no consequence at all. Besides, she was highly but silently amused at the idea of three of the lads, all Hobbit sized versions of themselves, walking around the barrack house looking for ladders and things, resulting in the rest of the team builders bursting into fits of raucous laughter.

"I'll stay, no problem," said Marina's friend and fellow Romanian, Gregor.

"Right, won't be long," said Franky. "And for God's sake, don't wander off."

This was met with severe frowns by the two Romanians, and it wasn't in fun. But neither did their displeasure last long at all.

Mike, Ted and Franky all smiled and waved and went back down the tunnel. This was to see what sort of search and rescue accoutrements were included in the standing inventory of a magically imported barrack house.

Marina and Gregor eased into small talk mode, talking of Krickenstaltz, food, music, and all sorts of other things, even Mike.

However, due to a combination of the weird effects of powerful acoustics which always seem inherent in solid stone Gothic churches, and the sound-deadening qualities of the rock, stone and compacted earth below, Marina, standing right underneath the grill, could be heard by anyone directly above, whereas Gregor, standing only a yard or so away, could not be heard at all – unless he was to shout, but that is indeed a rarity with Gregor. It was much the same weird effect which had shortly before resulted in the two ladies fainting.

Not long after Bert had totally given up on Heather Watson and had walked off to see what old Fred Stubbs was up to, Heather stopped chewing her gum and gave a puzzled frown. This was due to noticing a rather uncommon name on the tomb upon which she had been using a piece of brass to do her brass rubbing.

'MADAM LEONARA ZARAGUZTA, ROMANIAN MYSTIC
BORN APRIL THE 1ST 1634
DIED APRIL THE 1ST 1721'

"I wonder if she knew when she was going to die?" said Heather to herself.

"Vy duz everyvon keep asking zat?" said Marina to Gregor, who had been ribbing her about the long awaited proposal from Laszlo.

As Heather was as different from both Elsie and Nancy as it was possible to be, she grinned like a Cheshire cat. "I knew it! I knew this place was 'aunted!"

Heather looked around furtively.

Old Bert was now busy helping Tom 'Tubby' Wadlow, a particularly fat farmer's boy, with his efforts.

" . . . If you didn't permanently have a Mars Bar in your hand, you wouldn't have ate your wax, would you?" said an exasperated Bert to the easily disoriented Tubby.

The others were all busy doing their own thing, which Heather was glad about. "They's ain't gettin' in on this," she whispered to herself.

"Vot makes you zink I vont to?" said Marina the stubborn old spinster, after more teasing from Gregor.

"Oh no, not you, Leon – er – Madam, the others up 'ere."

But Heather's conversation with the other side was about to come to an abrupt end. Although both Marina and Gregor had begun to get bored of their subterranean stopping place, they did not expect to be shaken out of their boredom in such a dramatic fashion.

First came a terrible rattling, clanking, swinging and banging of heavy metal chains.

"Vot's zat!' and 'Bloody hell!' came from Marina and Gregor respectively, and as it was so loud, 'Did anyone hear that?' and similar were uttered up above. But there was more to come. . .

'MWHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAA! WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH! WOOOOOO-OOAAAAAAAAH! WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!' came booming up the tunnel from behind them. Then . . . 'YAAAAROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAH! WOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!' came wailing in from up ahead. Then. . . "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!" . . . from Gregor, who immediately dashed off into the shadows.

A very shrill "AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!" followed from Marina, who ran to the entrance of the nearest side tunnel, but in her panic her sense of audio direction was not functional in the least. As she went to dash through the gap and hopefully away to safety, something came out of the darkness and rattled and wailed right in her face. Marina turned back again, only to find some demonic being wrapped in chains blocking her way, clanking and banging, and now growling rather than howling.

Marina was about to scream again . . . but there was just something a little too familiar in the face sticking out of the top of an old white builders' rubble sack, and she thought she recognised the watch on the wrist of the right arm sticking out of the hole in the side, an arm which was still busy rattling a rusty, oily, filthy old chain. It was Ted's arm, which of course meant that the head sticking out of the top was Ted's head, so it's a fair assumption that the

rest of Ted was somewhere in the sack, too. And of course, if Ted was in one sack then it took no effort at all to work out that Franky was in the other.

"YOU – YOU – YOU IDIUTZ!" yelled Marina, standing there fuming, but something even more loud and angry was soon to follow.

As Marina began seemingly to snort from her nostrils as a short prelude to sheer apoplectic rage, Gregor came out from a little niche in the wall, feeling rather embarrassed to have gone in to hiding for the sake of two young pranksters in sacks and chains. A half-hearted Mike was supposed to have joined in, but he had given up before the three had even made it back to their two unsuspecting friends, ditching his pseudo-spectrish gear on the tunnel floor. He thought he'd left pretending to be a ghost behind in primary school.

Ted finally realised that his and Franky's idea of a good practical joke . . . well – a damned good scare, perhaps – had not gone down too well in certain quarters.

"Sorry, it was just a joke," he said, as his chains became still and quiet and his arms dropped limply by his sides. Franky soon followed suit.

"VEN I GET OUT OV 'ERE, YOU LOT ARE FOR IT! JUST YOU VAIT!" shouted Marina, very, very, very loudly. Ted and Franky stood stock-still and were shamefaced. Mike and Gregor stood stock-still because they were shocked.

Up above, however, the entire brass rubbing class had become rooted to the spot in fear, each and every one, after seemingly incurring the displeasure of a long-dead foreign psychic – but not for long. All were now yelling, shouting and screaming and running towards the door. So much for the friendly spirit of a Romanian mystic, thought Heather, well, no she didn't really, she was actually thinking of which was better – Mars Bars or Topics.

Once safely outside, some went straight to the pub next door to revive themselves, but most went right home. There were a few stragglers still to reach the exit. These had been nearer the altar and thus had further to go to make their escape.

Bert, one of the stragglers, raced along the outer aisle with the tails of his old raincoat flailing to and fro as he ran. About half way back down the church, a flying coat-tail brushed against the handle of a spade which had been left resting against a holy water font by the gardener. He had come in from his twilight slug repelling for a quick cuppa. He had left again rather quickly without enjoying it.

Bert was gone. The spade tottered, and then clattered and banged as it hit the front edge of the nearest pew at an angle. As the top-heavy spade had collided with the pew at a point beyond its centre of gravity, over it went, like a pole vaulter who had managed the vault but had still clipped the bar. After it had somersaulted beyond the front pew, it clattered onto the floor immediately before the altar. It then hit the side of the tomb of Madam Leonora Zaraguzta with a nerve-jangling metallic thungggggg, before eventually coming to rest on the floor alongside the altar rails.

What neither the tunnellers nor the brass rubbers had noticed, and perhaps

would not have been overly concerned about even if they had have done, was that due to the terrific bang as the spade had hit the tomb, a small round shining glass ball, or it could even be called a marble, or even a crystal, was dislodged from its setting on the top of the sarcophagus. It nestled within a groove of the wavy floral design complementing the stone outline of a knight's body at rest. As this particular groove was on the curve which swept downards to the bottom edge of the lid, the only thing keeping the glass ball from dropping was the groove's outer ridge. All it would take to make it fall right off and down on to the floor was the tiniest vibration, caused perhaps by an exceptionally loud noise made worse again by the resulting echoes. . .

With Mike and Gregor now feeling embarrassed and awkward rather than shocked, and with Ted and Franky still feeling embarrassed and guilty, Marina screamed repeatedly at both of them for being so stupid and thoughtless. Mike was lucky. Marina was never to know that he had at least been initially in on the prank. A prank which went far beyond giving a Marina and Gregor a fright, one which had caused panic followed by a mini stampede up above. Thankfully no-one had been really hurt in the rush for the exits, a few bruises here and there, and a few rapidly beating hearts which were right at this moment recovering exceptionally well next door, and that was it.

It wasn't too long before Marina finally stopped yelling. She shook her head, and after a few seconds she actually smiled. She was a good sport, really. All four males gave sighs of relief, and hugged this strange but loveable Romanian witch.

It was finally back to business. The two unconvincing spectres and Mike had indeed found a ladder, it was just a shame that next to the ladder they had also found some old rusty chains and a couple of old mildewed rubble sacks.

Although all five had to help due to the temporary lack of height, girth and strength for all of them, the ladder was fetched and with a struggle was put up against the wall of solid earth. After a quick test it was deemed safe enough for their needs, manageable even at an average height of two feet six inches.

The Reverend Waldrom came into the church with a tray of tea and some chocolate cake.

"I just thought you would all like a little somethi— Bert? Mrs Golightly? Agnes? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Whatever have I done to upset them?"

The guilt-ridden Reverend surveyed the pieces of wax and sheets of paper strewn all over the floor and went back in a daze to the presbytery.

The church was eerily silent for ten minutes or so. Finally, Franky and Ted pushed up a little hatch thought for centuries to be simply an air vent. While Ted held the loose grill clear, Franky pushed it to one side and climbed up and found himself in Sefton Church. Then Ted climbed up, followed by Mike and Gregor, who immediately turned and stooped and helped Marina up and

out of the tunnel.

When they had all finally surfaced and had dusted themselves down, they looked around and were soon in awe at such a beautiful church. It had been originally constructed by the finest Norman artisans in about 1170, but the church was re-built in Tudor times and there have been many modifications over the centuries. But there is enough of the best of all eras still standing, such as a few wooden carvings and the original mosaic floor tiles from the first construction, through to the stained glass windows of the Victorian era, to appreciate the fact it is still a magnificent place of worship.

"I know quite a bit about churches such as these. Before the Reformation, this was no doubt the Catholic Church of Saint Helen," said Gregor.

"How do you know that?" asked a puzzled Mike, who wasn't well up on such things, and wondered how Gregor could possibly know such a fact.

"It says so, right there on that placard:

'Before the Reformation, this was the Catholic Church of Saint Helen.'"

Mike and the others smiled at such silliness, apart from Franky, who gave a sigh and shook his head.

"Idiots! All such churches were Catholic up until the Reformation. That was the whole point!" said Franky, but with a smile.

The awaydayers knew that until they were sure they were totally alone, they shouldn't stray too far away from the escape hatch, as it were. But after a cautious check by Gregor, they relaxed a little and went for a wander right around the church.

They noticed the different types of stone favoured by builders and masons across several centuries of building and rebuilding. They took in the names and lives of many of those buried and interred within the church, imagining much to complement the sparse details on the headstones and tomb lids.

All still seemed quiet. After some hushed conferring, the friends decided to chance a look outside, if they could. The others were soon laughing at a comical vision of Mike peeping round the main door, just to make sure there was no-one about. The church should have been well locked up by now, but the terrified verger had been one of the first out during the panic, taking the keys with him.

The still shaking verger was now at home, writing out a rather spidery letter of resignation. It was no wonder that Mike had found the door wide open.

Mike turned and gave a thumbs up sign. They all quickly trooped outside to have a look around the graveyard, but only for a couple of minutes as it was just too risky to stay longer.

Although not even Ted or Franky knew all the ins and outs, they knew that interred within the church and buried in the graveyard, were various members of the Blundell and Molyneaux families: the former famed for holding on to their original faith and holding out against all odds, while the

latter joined with the Tudors after the Reformation.

Franky, an amateur student of the history of art in ceramics, was enthralled to find the grave of one John Sadler, father of transfer-printing, just to the side of the main entrance.

"Beautiful place, this," said Ted, as they all trooped back inside. "If only our own community had been more understood. Still, we're all batting for the same side, even if not everyone realises it."

"You English, ve are in church and you still talk about ze cricket," said Marina. Ted diplomatically did not reply to this, and just smiled.

Franky began to get a little on edge. He realised that it might look odd if someone from the church came through and saw them, especially as they were all still only between two and three feet in height. As he knew that luck never holds, he ushered the gang back inside and over to the tunnel entrance.

"Right folks, best we crack on. Back in the tunnel, is it?"

In reply came three nods and one shake of the head. The dissenter was of course, Marina. "No vay. I didn't zink it vud be zo stinky."

"Who knows the way back by road?" asked Mike.

They all shrugged their shoulders and smiled, as they didn't actually care. As Big Bill Dooley had said, 'They's on their 'olidays!"

Mike suddenly realised something.

"If we're walking back, hadn't we best get back to normal size?"

"Yez, you iz qvite right, but ve can't rizk scaringz ze localz, zo make sure zer iz ztill novon around, and zen I vill do ze reverse spell," said Marina.

Mike went outside once more, but he soon came back in and gave the all clear. A minute or so later there was a flash of bright light, and with the heightened acoustics of the old church, a veritable – BOOM!

The awaydayers didn't quite set off straightaway for home. They noticed that right next door was a quaint village pub called the Punch Bowl. They called in for a quick one, went to sit in the corner – only to find Estella, Ernst, and Josh grinning inanely at them. They had followed on a short while earlier.

Mike, thinking he was in for his next illicit pint of lager was a little disappointed when Josh's order for him was changed by Estella to lemonade, but he didn't really mind.

"Where you lot from?" said one of the locals, noticing their strange garb.

As they had not previously discussed such a scenario they had not worked on a unified answer for such occasions.

"Magic show." "Pageant." "College rag week." "Fancy dress party." all came out in one big garbled mess.

"Nutters, more like," muttered the local to himself, returning to his pie and pint.

"Ever heard of the Grand National, you lot?" asked Josh.

There was a unanimous but puzzled yes to this, as they wondered why Josh would ask such a thing. Everyone knew about the Grand National, the

most famous and most dangerous Steeplechase in the world.

"If you look out that window and towards the field at the back of the church, that was part of the original Grand National course. So sad just to see it now, just a muddy piece of wasteground. . . "

"ZZZ

tucked it back under his arm.

At the same time, Professor Cornstone's eyes went all misty. He then jumped up and started conducting an orchestra that wasn't there.

Big Bill Dooley started singing in a typical music hall style, with exaggerated phrasing, melodramatic delivery and every effort being made to keep the regional accent in rather than filter it out.

'Now I'll tell you all a story, with a twist that's in its tail,
or maybe with a moral if you will.
For to ignore such sad advice,of dishonest avarice,
will result in getting dead or very ill.

Now each day upon the corner, stood a girl called Annie Horner,
who would sell her penny matches all day long.
She never got to wishin', for to end her disposition,
and she bore it all with fortitude and song.

'Now come and get your matches, Gents! Come and get your lights!
They only cost a penny, that ain't bad!
For I'se only Annie Horner, and I stands upon this corner,
for to get some coppers for my sick old dad.'

Now one early winter's mornin', Annie's dad he had a warnin',
'Get the doctor in – or you will surely croak.'
But poor Annie she was cryin', for her dad who's in bed dyin',
for poor Annie – had no money – for the bloke.

With her eyes all full of tears, and despite of all her fears,
she went out to earn herself an honest bob.
Who then came out walkin', with a lady friend a-talkin',
but the doctor who wants payin' for the job.

'Come and buy my matches, sir! Come and buy my lights!
They only cost a penny, that ain't bad.
For if you buy my matches, sir, for if you buy my lights,
I can pay for you to cure my sick old dad.'

The lady friend did lift her face, her nose up in the air.
The doctor gave a sickly smile, to cross her he'll not dare.
'I do not need your matches, lass, no, not a single one.
Now run along back to your home, your father may be gone.'

Her tears fell right down on the ground, she wondered what life's for.
She climbed up high onto the bridge, she couldn't take no more.
'Now don't do that young lady,' said a gentle voice it spoke.
'Now come and tell me of your woes and wear my nice warm cloak.'

Now Annie told the kindly gent of why such desperation,
but very soon her heart had leapt in glorious elation.
The kindly gent he bought her wares and cured her father's bones.
The man who'd given Annie hope, was kindly Doctor Jones.

Now on a stormy evenin' the old doctor he was leaving,
after dining with his lady – Maddie Bright.
In his jacket were no matches that were needed for the candles,
for to fill his gloomy house with warmth and light.

He went over to the corner for to look for Annie Horner,
she was simply not around – no not at all.
He fumbled at the doorway and he fiddled for his keys,
and he stumbled on the step into the hall.

The house was all in darkness as he climbed upon the stairs,
but he fell and broke his neck and then he groaned.
But who should come a-runnin' with a light to see their way,
twas young Annie, and her husband, Doctor Jones.

Young Doctor Jones he scratched his chin, and to his colleague tended.
But so severe had been the fall, his useful life now ended.
Annie went and fetched more help from those with hats and habits,
the ailing bones soon on their way, to good St. Mary Abbot's.

The old doctor's in a wheelchair as he's pushed along the road,
and he hears a sad old song down by the docks.
'Who will buy my matches, sir?! Who will buy my lights?!'
'I will, lass – please sell me every box.'"

There were looks of amazement from the audience at witnessing Big Bill's imagination and versatility, as well as appreciating the poignancy of such an otherwise comic song. They shouted, hollered, cheered, and yelled 'Bravo!, and 'Encore!'

What was also beyond belief was that although it was a deliberate part of the spell, Professor Cornstone had not been conducting a tuppence-hapenny theatre orchestra to accompany a big, gruff, Music Hall singer, he had actually gone through Beethoven's Ninth in its entirety. His hair was all ruffled, his tie was askew and he bobbed his head at differing intervals. He flung his arms out wildly and with a manic look on his face and using his wand as the baton, he brought in the non-existent string and brass sections into the symphony.

But there was more.

Big Bill Dooley had set the spell to carry on after he had finished his song.

Bill and the others all sat there nearly wetting themselves with laughter at such a display.

Professor Cornstone finally finished, turned round, smiled, held out his arms to the audience and, thinking he was holding a bouquet of flowers, bowed repeatedly and calmly went back to his seat. As the glazed look in his eyes faded away, he looked over at the others who were still in a fit of laughter.

"Just you wait! See how you like it stuck in the middle of a field like a cow!"

"Or a pig," whispered Estella.

"I heard that!" said Professor Cornstone. For reasons he couldn't quite understand, they were all still bursting their sides with laughter, even Mike.

Although Mike had wanted a diversion from the usual scenario of Professor Cornstone bating, he had to admit that Big Bill Dooley had put on a marvellous act, especially turning the Professor into a conductor. As for the song he had heard Bill sing, he was too young to quite appreciate its poignancy but he enjoyed it nonetheless. It reminded him of '*The Good Old Days*', a TV programme where everyone was dressed in period costume as if they were at an Edwardian music hall, and which he used to watch when round at Sweaty Eric's grandmother's house.

'This has been great!' thought Mike to himself as the laughter faded, giving way to a much more sedate but nonetheless pleasantly mellow atmosphere, until. . .

" . . . Josh, Professor Winch here. I've got to break up the party. You'll all have to come back immediately."

"Why, Professor, what has happened?"

"Nothing bad, rather the opposite, but to make use of this sudden advantage, I do need you all back here as soon as possible."

Josh sighed. He could have argued but he didn't. If it was so important to Professor Winch, then he realised they would all have to go back straightaway.

"Fair enough, Professor, we'll be there as soon as we can. See you soon."

"Thank you, Josh. Bye for now," said a relieved Professor Winch, after thinking he was going to have a fight on his hands.

54

Times are a-Changin'

"READY?" "READY!"

Professor Winch and Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne whooshed away off the roof of Hemlock Hall, on their way to Romania.

It is times like these that show that magic folk, occasionally at least, make rods for their own backs. Ahead lay a freezing cold two-thousand mile journey on broomsticks, for which even the most charmed outdoor thermal coat offers little protection against the biting wind, rain and cold.

"Two tickets to Bucharest, please," said Professor Winch at the ticket desk.

Anthony smiled as he saw the cleaners at Heathrow Airport take away two broomsticks with the rubbish.

"Not all it's cracked up to be, this broomstick malarkey," observed Professor Winch.

"I must agree with you there, old fellow," replied Anthony.

"Er – Anthony, sorry to be an old stick in the mud and all that, but less of the old fellow and old bean, and any other old this and thats you have in your vocabulary. I am the boss here, you know."

"Sorry, old ma' – er – Professor, habits of a lifetime and all that."

A little later and they were warm and snug in Business Class as they flew off to Bucharest.

"These ordinary folks aren't as daft as they seem," said Anthony. Professor Winch smiled.

"Must agree with you there, Anthony – old chap. . ."

The professor ensured that both of them took full advantage of the refreshments offered. He knew that once they had landed their quest would begin in earnest, and he did not know when or where their next meal would be. Sleep was important too, but he wanted to go through a few things first.

"Remember, Anthony, we have been used to dealing with the enemy on barren terrain, mountains, plains or even lush pastures, but the Warlocks of Bucharest are not called so without reason. From the moment we land in Bucharest we are in their territory, so we must watch our step."

"I see your point, Professor, but this is a modern city nowadays. The warlocks are not the brightest; but even they must realise that they would stand out on a city street."

"I know what you're getting at, but while we are here we must be on tip-top form at all times. I can't imagine a warlock in a business suit and carrying a briefcase myself, but nor can I see a troop of warlocks adorned in sheekpskins and brandishing flails and bludgeons piling out of a taxi and hitting the Lipsca for a few scoops. With such uncertainty, we must be

prepared for anything, or anyone."

A tired Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne nodded, yawned and closed his eyes, but the professor had one more instruction.

"Before you nod off, please remember to wake up as Anton. It is absolutely vital you reassume the role fully."

"Gud night, Profezzor. . . "

Anton awoke to find one Ronaldo Blipp sitting next to him.

Gone was Professor Winch's seriously greyed, thin, wispy, long hair. Instead, he had a full, wiry, wavy, out of control mane of jet black hair with a strangely unmatching ginger moustache and sideboards. In place of his cloak and his long black overcoat, he had on a multicoloured jacket and unmatching waistcoat with a fob watch hanging from the pocket. A blue and orange striped shirt and a purple tie completed the upper ensemble. He wore plus-four patchwork-patterned golfing trousers and long black riding boots, and just to ham it up as he realised Anton was grinning at him, he put on his top hat. Anton just shook his head and grinned even more.

After landing in Otopeni Airport and boarding the bus to travel the fifteen miles to the city centre, Ronaldo decided that the best way to travel deep into the surrounding countryside was to hire a car, and if it became necessary, hike over the hills.

After alighting from the bus with the little luggage they had, they walked down the Lipsca, the main thoroughfare in the commercial district of Bucharest. Although both had been there before, they still couldn't help but marvel at the range and diversity of the architecture and the cultural aspects of the city.

Across the Lipsca are many side streets on which the traders and retailers specialize in certain goods. The most famous of these is The Street of Saddlers, where equine and riding goods have been made and sold for centuries.

Around the city and along the banks of the Dambovita River there are many museums, churches, palaces, cinemas and casinos, as well as hundreds of hotels, bars and restaurants. All these facets of Buchestian life, together with the strange but fascinating arrangements of specially built flats and apartments for ordinary workers, often reminds travellers of Paris. Indeed, it is often referred to as Little Paris, because it has much in common with the French Capital, but has it all in a much smaller area.

After turning down a sadly derelict looking side street, they arrived at their first point of call – Alexandru Galleron's Car Hire & Taxi Service.

"While we are here, Anthony, we can be ourselves, but be ready to revert to Lieberman at a moment's notice," said Professor Winch, as they stopped outside a grubby, grimy, small iron door.

Anthony nodded as his boss rang the doorbell.

A little fat man with an unkempt mop of greasy grey hair, the waist band of his trousers up to his chest, a not too clean white shirt, and a huge black

moustache dripping olive oil, opened the door to the visitors.

He wiped the olive oil away with his sleeve and smiled at his customers, but much to Anthony's surprise, the little man looked up and down the street, gently took hold of Professor Winch's arm, and guided him through the door and into the back of the establishment, gesturing for Anthony to follow.

This strange little man gestured for his visitors to hand him their overnight bags, he turned and placed these carefully against the sidewall of the little room, and then turned back, smiling broadly.

"Gawd bless ya, Professor Winch. When they said you was a-comin' over, I jus' couldn't believe it. Twenty years!"

Professor Winch returned the smile as the two men embraced and shook hands.

"Alex, my old friend! You've not changed a bi – er – well, not mu – er – hasn't time flown!"

Alex looked sadly down at his paunch, and laughed. "Great disguise though, eh!"

"Yes, definitely, for that highly indigenous tribe, the Mexican Bandits of Bucharest!" replied Professor Winch. More laughter followed, this time from both old friends. It was so infectious that Anthony could not help but join in.

When the laughter had subsided, Alex looked to Anthony and smiled. "And who have we here, then?"

"Alex, please meet one Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne, Anthony, this is a very dear friend of mine, Alexandru Galleron," said Professor Winch.

"Pleased to meet ya! Just call me Alex, everybody else does," said a reddening no-frills Alex, who hated to hear his name stated in full.

"Pleased to meet you, too, Alex, just call me . . . " said an unusually uncertain Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne. Professor Winch gave a brief smile and a faint nod. "Anthony."

The uncertainty was banished, and Anthony returned the smile and offered his hand to Alex, which the little fellow took and shook warmly.

"Well, chaps, who's for a cuppa?" said Alexandru Galleron.

"Yes, please, Alex, that would be very welcome, thank you," replied Professor Winch.

They were in a small flatlet built on to the back of the garage. After moving a plate of rapidly congealing fried eggs onto the kitchen counter, Alex gestured for them to sit round a small table and chairs in the kitchenette, defined as such by the presence of said small table and chairs, just a couple of feet further into the same room.

Alex boiled up a kettle and made a pot of tea, and after gathering up the usual accoutrements a fully-laden tea tray was soon placed on the table.

Although Professor Winch had not said beforehand whether he was or whether he wasn't, Anthony now had no doubt whatsoever that Alex was 'one of us'. He marvelled at how it was possible that two people could fight for the same side and at times operate in the same country for decades upon

decades, without either being aware of the other's existence.

To help with such a deception, Alex did indeed hire out cars and run a taxi service from this grimy little hole in a concrete wall, and had done so for just on thirty years. He was assisted in this masquerade by his wife of twenty-seven years, Mary Rose.

"How is Mary Rose, Alex?" asked Professor Winch, while sipping his tea.

"She's very well, thank you, Professor. She's out shopping at the moment, but you'll see her later," replied Alex, finally sitting down next to his guests.

"Good, good," carelessly replied Professor Winch. "Onto other matters. I take it you know they've got Aloysius?"

"Yes, terrible, absolutely terrible. I hope he's OK. So how do you propose to rescue him?"

Professor Winch looked a little awkward.

"That is not really why I am here, not the main reason."

Alex looked puzzled.

"What are you here for, then?"

"To find Merlin."

"What?! I thought he died a while back!"

"I sincerely hope not, Alex, if he has, we've had it. However, the last report we had of him was that he was very ill, but still hanging on. Do you at least know of where he used to live?"

"Not exactly. He was a sly old one and no mistake. He was very definitely deep in the Hagelbarm Mountains, I knew that much, but pinning him down was impossible."

"That's a start. And at least it's got to be somewhere near to Grezjgenschtad. And if we're lucky we'll be able to kill two birds with one stone. . . "

"I'd much rather you said save two wizards in one go, Professor," said Alex.

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean . . . hmmm."

"Professor," said Anthony, "I don't want to add to your woes, but if the warlocks break Professor Pendragon and if Zenith gets wind and immediately returns, we won't make it back in time. Even if we do find Merlin, it will be too late."

"I know, Anthony, I know, but what else can I do? Zenith is no doubt already back in Britain, and although I have mobilised all of the WSS to guard all of the coastlines of the British Isles to keep him in, it's an almost impossible task to do this every single second of every day, along every inch of the coast. And God forbid, should Aloysius indeed succumb to the warlocks' somewhat rustic methods of persuasion, then we don't even know for sure if Zenith would try to come back here, or if he would persuade the warlocks to bring Aloysius to him. It's just one big headache," said a tired and worried Professor Winch.

But Anthony had a rather hopeful look on his face.

"I've been thinking about that, Professor, in fact I have a suggestion which

I'd like to run by you: When Mike and Estella were rescued, it was all down to a Benny-the-Many spell. Now I know it's a gamble, but assuming Zenith does try and return here, what if he was at least made to think that there was no way out? What if thousands of WSS troops were made to look like millions – billions, even? I know there's no guarantee it will work, but I think it's worth at least a quick run up the old flagpole to see who salutes it. . ."

Professor Winch did not verbally respond to this, but his countenance brightened considerably, although at the same time he groaned inwardly at Anthony's liberal use of infuriating HR jargon.

The professor stood and went over to the side of the room and quickly opened his overnight bag. He took out a small bakelite case; this had been customised to permanently house Professor Winch's own private and portable telemagickeraph.

He brought the case back across the room, placed it on the table, and opened the lid. Due to the need for urgency, he quickly unclasped a seashell lying lengthways in its own slot to the left side of the main part of the magic communications machine, and gently pulled it upright. The magic gizmo was now in audio mode.

"Hello, Ren? It's Gabriel here. . ." said Professor Winch, speaking in urget tones directly down the seashell. " . . . Yes, yes, I know, Ren . . . REN! That is enough! Until I am officially censured and officially removed, I am still leader of the WFW Council! . . . That's better . . . Alex? Yes, yes, I'm with him now . . . How is he? He's gone very fa—ine, really fine looking, fine. Ren – shut up a moment – this is important. . . "

Professor Winch discussed Anthony's idea with his esteemed colleague, who did indeed agree that it was possible. But a minor complication was brought to the fore.

" . . . Yes, yes of course I know it's Marina's specialty, but she's not there, is she . . . No, it's not my fault! Apparently, she took an immediate liking to Big Bill and off she went . . . Laszlo? How on earth should I know if he's upset?! He's at your place not mine! Re-Re-REN! For Pete's sake – listen! . . . Pete? . . . What?! . . . Who's Pete?! It's just an expression! Look, can you do it or not? . . . You can? . . . Good! Don't forget, you will need an awful lot of hair and I don't care how you get it. Must go now, Ren . . . Yes yes, we'll deal with Septimus and Engelbert on my return. Goodbye for now."

An exasperated but highly relieved Professor Winch sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Thank you, Anthony, that is an absolutely brilliant idea. Ren Stannich is sorting it all out as we speak."

"Gotta hand it to the old misery. Although he's the last person you'd rouse up for a game of arrers and a few slurps, he certainly knows his stuff with things like this," said Alex.

Professor Winch just diplomatically nodded and smiled.

"He certainly does," agreed Anthony, "mind you, he hasn't actually done anything – yet," he added with a wicked smile, but the other two knew he

was only joking. All three knew that when it came to expertise in some branches of magic, Ren Stannich was the best bar none.

Professor Winch allowed just a few minutes of small talk: discussing friends of friends, Bucharest compared with London, and of course a few jokes and a little laughter. Professor Winch eventually cut short the blather to bring them all back to the matters at hand.

"Well, gents, at least we know that the enemy can still do their worst and still not get what they want, at least for now and hopefully never. However, we cannot rest on our laurels, that would be fatal, which is why we must get back to the main reason we are here, which is of course to try and find Merlin. Now, a silly question: Alex, do you have a car for us?"

"Yes, yes of course. I've got a perfectly good Ford Capri. It's years old but I've kept it in good nick, well, sort of. When are you actually going?"

"Right now, old friend, we have to."

"But what about Mary Rose?"

"Sorry, but maybe we can call in on our way home."

"Yes, that will be nice. Come on then."

Anthony picked up the two bags and Alex guided the two departees outside into the yard, where a rusting, filthy, faded, red Ford Capri was parked.

"It looks a bit past it, but the engines good and the tank's full. Keys are in the ignition."

"Well, Alex, thank you for your time and I hope to see you again soon. Goodbye for now," said Professor Winch.

"Bye, Alex, nice meeting you, old fellow," added Anthony.

"And you, and less of the old fellow," replied Alex, but with a smile.

"You two aren't related, are you?" asked Anthony.

"What?!"

"Nothing. Bye."

With that, both Professor Winch and Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne traded further fond farewells and warm hearty handshakes with Alexandru Galleron, and then found themselves on what they both thought was the passenger side of the car.

"Oh sorry, forgot, European model," said Anthony, upon realising it wasn't. But the strange thing is, both men went around to the other side.

"Don't tell me you can't drive?!" said both to each other at exactly the same time. And then. . . "Neither can I!"

Alex, who had been about to go back in, turned round and witnessed this nonsense. He sighed, gave a rufeul smile and shouted over to Anthony.

"Look, it's an automatic! Can you turn a key?"

"Yes, of course I can!"

"Can you steer?"

"I think so."

"Can you move your foot up and down on either of the pedals?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Then get going!"

The professor went back round to the nearside and both men went to get in the car, but Anthony popped his head up again.

"What about reversing?!"

"Don't reverse!" shouted back Alex.

Anthony gave a puzzled grin, opened the offside door, flung the bags on to the back seat, turned back, gave a final wave, and then turned again and got in the car.

Professor Winch gave his final farewell, opened the nearside door and slid into the passenger seat. The car doors slammed shut, the engine roared, the wheels squealed, the car shot up the gravel driveway – and took out the corner of Alex's front wall. This was due to Anthony turning left too soon. It was true that the wall was already wobbly to begin with, but still. . .

"Sorry!" came a muffled shout. The engine roared and the wheels squealed once more; they were finally on their way.

No sooner had the badly driven Ford Capri roared out of sight, than Alexandru Galleron fell to the floor as he was walking back in to finish his meal of cold, congealed fried eggs.

A few moments later, Mary Rose, a tall, elegant, English lady, spoke down the telephone.

" . . . You weren't joking, were you? I have been trying for over twenty-seven years to get proof, and now I've got it. That traitor Lieberman was here, as well as that odd fellow, Blipp, although I am sure I heard Alex call him Lynch, or even Pinch, I just couldn't get close enough in time . . . Winch? . . . *PROFESSOR WINCH?!* . . . Well that takes the biscuit, doesn't it?! And as for that trumped up hooey about the boss owning Morecambe or Barrow, or some horrid northern place. . . What?! . . . Blackpool, then! They're all the same to me! Tripe, the lot of it! I tried to tell you all years ago, but did anyone listen? No!

" . . . Right, I heard something about Merlin and the Hagelbarm Mountains, so you'd best tell that caveman Zezk to expect trouble . . . No, I won't go out there myself! Marinated rats?! No thank—!"

The call ended – suddenly. The telephone was not put back on the receiver but was just left dangling.

Alex replaced his battle-wand in his belt, frowned, and looked down upon the stupefied body of his wife. Mary Rose wasn't dead but would remain immobile until safely in the custody of the guards at Glastonbury Prison.

Mary Rose's twenty-seven year stint as an unwitting ally of the WFW was at an end.

"I'm awfully sorry, my dear, but the WFW are not entirely stupid."

Alex had put blanks in his wife's Magnum 44 that very morning, after she had put live rounds in it the evening before, but such things are never missed by an ever watchful and highly perceptive Alexandru Galleron. He of course already knew that tensions were escalating within the magic community, but he now also knew that his very life was in danger.

After checking the telephone and just getting the Romanian equivolent of

the pre-recorded mantra, 'Please replace the handset and try again. . .', Alex duly replaced the handset, picked it up again, and pressed the Last Number Rung button on the telephone.

"Forgetful? . . . Yes, it's me, Alex. Did you get that? . . . Good. It's odd, really. I'll actually miss her – but loaded pistols do tend to spoil things – she had to go. . . "

Alex was of course talking to Principal 'Forgetful' Jones, Principal of the University of Abracadrystwyth.

While Mary Rose had been talking to her fellow spy, the agent in question, one Marco Dracov, had been surrounded by Forgetful and two rather muscular agents of the WFW.

This masquerade, although not winning a destiny changing victory for the powers of good, was nonetheless effective in preventing information from reaching Zenith's HQ.

However, Dracov was still to pass on some of what he had heard to his unsuspecting superiors. Even deliberate leaks containing absolute claptrap must contain some nuggets of truth, even if this means a degree of residual risk, or the exercise can be as pointless as the bulk of useless data.

" . . . No, they've gone now, I'll tell them in a minute . . . telemagickeraph?! You must be joking! This little outpost is lucky to get a case of brown ale once a month, but there's a car radio installed, it used to be a taxi, I'll give 'em a buzz on that . . . Me lunch? Nah, more like late brekky. Fried eggs, mate – flippin' stone cold fried eggs – you? . . . Rock salmon! You lucky blighter! . . . Yes, I am sure you will, I hope you choke on 'em! Only joking . . . Yes, speak to you again soon. Bye-bye."

Alex replaced the telephone receiver and picked up the transmitter from his taxi-radio console.

"Hello, this is the office calling Car Fifty-Five, come in please. Car Fifty-Five, come in please."

The driver and passenger of Car Fifty-Five looked at each other blankly. Professor Winch just hadn't got a clue at all, but Anthony quickly realised it must be a car radio. He looked around, picked up the receiver and pressed the button.

"Er – Car Fifty-Five here, what seems to be the problem?"

"Nice to know the car's still in one piece! Please tell the boss that my divorce just came through."

"What?!" said Anthony.

Professor Winch had also heard this, in fact he had been expecting as much. He smiled and said, "Ask him if we are to expect an angry lover."

Anthony looked blankly at his boss but eventually and reluctantly asked the question.

"That's a negative, gentlemen. There is no-one else involved. Over and out," replied Alex.

"Good! Very good!" said Professor Winch to Anthony. "Marco Dracov is proving very useful indeed!"

Although Anthony is of course familiar with the Dracov story, he did not have a clue about Mary Rose. Professor Winch explained, without going into too much detail, that part of Alex's undercover work had been to marry an enemy agent who did not know that she had been compromised.

Over the intervening years, Alex had made more and more slip ups, some of which contained the odd snippet of truth. This was for the sake of credibility, to ensure that Mary Rose kept in constant contact with her superiors.

These communications were of course monitored, and more recently after the elimination of all of her usual contacts, Marco Dracov had been installed as the new go-between. However, he was a go-between that happened to have some of the toughest WFW agents permanently on either side of him as he played his new role to absolute perfection.

This master-stroke enabled the WFW to have even greater control over what information their enemies should and should not become privy to, at least through this channel.

As for Mary Rose, throughout her entire married life she had truly believed that her husband was totally unsuspecting, that he had had no idea of her real vocation; nor had she ever had any idea that he knew that she knew that he worked for the WFW. Mary Rose was soon to be in for a very rude awakening.

"Is there anything else I should know?" asked a dumbfounded Anthony, but Professor Winch-now-Blipp-again gave a sickly smile and just shrugged his shoulders, feigning total incomprehension.

"Iz zer anyzing else, Mizter Blipp?!"

"Not at the moment!" said the still inanely smiling Ronaldo Blipp.

They motored on, leaving the city far behind and were soon deep into the countryside.

Anton knew to stay on the DN1 all the way to Brasov, but he knew the going would then get really tough, as an ascent up the Eastern Carpathians was to follow.

Finally, the motorway came to an end and the two wizards were now cruising along what the British would call dual carriageways. But after a few hours these also petered out to be replaced by single lane country roads, and it was then they first noticed that they were on the rise, as they could feel and hear the two-litre engine labouring, a little.

As the night came on, the roads narrowed yet again and the ascent was a little sharper, leaving an uncertain Anton struggling on what could only be called dirt tracks, and so he brought the car to a scrunching halt on the screeish covered track.

"Zat iz it, Profezzor, ve can go no furzer."

After the long drive, both were tired and hungry. Professor Blipp took out provisions from his bag and shared them out between them. He had hoped to be able to crack on, but he knew it was useless to do so in the dead of night. He may be a powerful wizard, but that still wasn't enough to see in the

dark on a night when the stars were blanked out by dense cloud and drizzly rain.

Allowing his boss the comparative luxury of the back seat, Anton did his best to stretch out across the two separate front seats. Five minutes later he opted for the colder but more spacious great outdoors, and still managed to get absolutely no sleep at all and soaking wet to boot.

Ronaldo Blipp woke to the sound of sizzling. Anton was preparing breakfast of bacon and eggs over an open fire. He was also muttering to himself.

They both sat around the fire with their blankets wrapped around them.

"And how much further now, Profezzor?" asked Anthony, and in a less than friendly tone which did not go unnoticed, but was, for the moment, ignored.

"I was only joking, Anthony, talk freely when there's no-one around. Much more zs, js and ks and I'll go crackers! We are in the foothills of the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, the Hagelbarms are a smaller range beyond them, so quite a way yet."

An unusually grumpy Anton-now-Anthony snapped back at his boss.

"I KNOW where the ******* Carpathians are! I was over here for decades! Anyway – now what? If you don't know precisely where he is, what are we to do?!"

Professor Winch again noted the less than happy tone, but once more chose to ignore it. He pulled out of his pocket what looked like a combination of a child's spinning top and a highly ornate, three-tiered weather vane. On the top tier was a solid silver rooster.

"What use is that against the Chaotagens?" uncharacteristically sneered Anthony.

Professor Winch again noted the tone and this time did not dismiss it so easily, but he still allowed some emotional leeway, due to knowing only too well what extreme fatigue can do to the spirit.

"No use at all, in the usual sense," replied the professor, "but it is going to do two things for us today. Firstly, it will lead us to Merlin, and then it may be of use in restoring Merlin to full health, although sadly I cannot be certain of that."

"That thing! We'll be lucky if it told us it was windy in the middle of a hurricane!" mocked Anthony.

"You are a good secret agent, Anthony," said Professor Winch, noting a lighter inflection despite the mockery, which thankfully pegged back the upper-crust spy to Strike-Two, "but you still have a lot to learn, my friend. This is one of Merlin's own most brilliant inventions. Contained within this seemingly useless trinket is ancient magic that gave Merlin his longevity. It is upon losing it to his ambitious scion that Merlin's health began to fail.

"It would appear that Professor Zenith, upon finding the man he had idolised for years was nothing more than a powerless old fool, stole it to see if he could utilise its magic . . . I stole it back some time ago while disguised as Ronaldo.

"I intend to offer this to Merlin as an inducement to help us. He can then work its inherent magic, and maybe, just maybe, he will regain his strength," explained the professor.

"Why just maybe?" asked Anthony.

"Age, Anthony, age. His phenomenal tally of years combined with his weakened state of health may prevent the magic from still being effective, but that is a risk I must leave to Merlin to decide to take – or not – as the case may be."

"I see, Headmaster, sorry for doubting you. You said it will help us find him – how will it do that?"

"This little gizmo is also what it seems to be, sort of. . . "

"There's always a sort of! Go on then, amaze me."

Professor Winch raised his eyebrows at such seemingly disrespectful levity, but he concluded this still wasn't a Strike-Three level retort, so deferred the rigorous carpeting and instead just gave a little laugh.

However, due to Anthony Ffye-Tremayne's current somewhat negative state of mind, Professor Winch chose not to waste his time and breath going into the ins and outs of the second and yet distinctly different use this magic charm could be put to. When used by Merlin centuries before, it had often aided the sorcerer in locating both people and places. On the rare occasions he had trusted others with it, but only those very close to him such as Arthur or Lancelot or Gawain, they had used it to locate Merlin if the magician was far away from Camelot while trouble was stirring in the realm.

Professor Winch placed the gizmo on the ground, span the bottom tier clockwise which immediately set off a chain reaction. The middle tier started spinning anti-clockwise, the top tier clockwise, and finally the rooster itself span very fast indeed, anti-clockwise.

After thirty seconds or so the rooster began to slow down, finally coming to a full stop a few seconds later.

"And there you have it, Anthony. The rooster has detected Merlin. He's some way north of here," announced Professor Winch.

"But the rooster is facing south!" said a still sceptical Anthony.

"Trust me. Merlin was, probably still is, a sly old devil. Even when he was still on our side, no-one could take anything he did or said at face value . . . plus – he told me once that the rooster got damaged and hasn't worked properly since. . ."

The still unsure Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne burst out laughing, as did Professor Winch.

Anthony parked the Capri behind the largest outcrop he could find. But both men knew that if they were to keep the car from prying eyes, whether belonging to officialdom, thieves or mountaineers, just hoping it would not be spotted by any or all of these was not enough.

They conferred briefly on what the best spell would be.

Both initially thought of making the car vanish, but Professor Winch just as quickly dismissed this due to the potential danger to others. Something

made invisible by magic was of course, still extant and in a very real solid state.

Magically shifting the car back to Alex's garage was also mooted, but just as quickly dismissed. Not only would the two possibly need the car in a hurry later on, but magically transporting large heavy objects was fraught with danger and usually required a small army of wizards to manage it.

But a minute or so later the car had vanished and the outcrop itself had grown somewhat: a mossy mound in the middle, and two large boulders at either end.

Professor Winch tutted. Changing natural topography by magic, even if only temporarily, was against the law.

But if they were to need a ride back to civilisation after the conclusion of their task, or if things somehow went badly wrong resulting in a dire need for a getaway car, then he felt they had no other option but to retain and disguise the Ford Capri, the legal position notwithstanding.

"Come on, let's get togged up and get cracking," replied Professor Winch, with a groan.

Both men delved into their bags for boots, wooly hats and kagouls, which they had soon put on.

"Ready?" asked Professor Winch, after their currently useless urban apparel had been stowed in their bags, which were then slung over their shoulders.

Anthony nodded.

The search for Merlin began in earnest – on foot and on the ascent – northwards.

Professor Winch knew that as good as this magic weather vane / spinning top hybrid was, it was not that accurate from long range. After a further check a little later on, the rooster was pointing southwest, so on they went again – northeast.

They were in the foothills of the Eastern Carpathians. Thankfully, the two wizards did not have to go over the top of any of the peaks making up this range, many of which were very high indeed, but they would still have to negotiate some of its lower slopes en route to their destination, the Hagelbarm Mountains. This was an overall smaller range. Its peaks were not very high, but rather ironically all were far steeper climbs than the slopes they were currently addressing.

However, Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne knew only too well that such differences were very much a relative affair. Never mind the Hagelbarms, he was worried that these supposedly gentler slopes may well still present a problem for his elderly colleague – for a Glee Club jolly up the Great Orme this most certainly was not.

Anthony had guessed right. Before they had even managed to ascend another twenty feet or so, a now perspiring and stooped Professor Winch shook his head, sighed and tutted. This did not go unnoticed.

Anthony smiled to himself and muttered something under his breath. In an instant, two broomsticks which were about to be crunched up in the

pantechnicon belonging to Hounslow Council Refuse Department, disappeared from the lorry and reappeared in the hands of Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne.

"I thank you for your concern, Anthony, but have you forgotten something?"

Anthony looked blankly back at his leader.

"Daytime, Anthony, daytime."

"Oh, OK," said a seemingly unconcerned Anthony, as he threw the broomsticks to the floor and over-exaggerated tying up his boot laces nice and tight. He then commenced exercising his leg muscles, similar to a footballer before the game. . .

*

"Lovely view, Professor!" said Anthony – from ten-thousand feet up.

"If we get shot down by the Romanian Airforce, I'll personally contact Zenith and tell him all about you!" said Professor Winch.

Anthony just gave a wan smile.

They flew on and on and were again cold and hungry. They eventually left behind the Carpathians, and a new mountain range came in to view, the Hagelbarms. Professor Winch pointed downwards as a sign to land.

They flew down, landed, and found themselves in a gladed valley. They decided to rest a while and Professor Winch dug deep into his bag to see what provisions were left.

Anthony made a fire for both of them to warm themselves, and they ate the last of the chicken legs and finished off the highly stewed flask of tea.

The rooster was again placed on the ground: it spun round, it stopped, and Professor Winch groaned. Anthony had a good idea why: if the Carpathians had defeated the old professor, how on earth was he going to manage a steeper ascent?

"It might not be all that bad, boss. surely we can get a little nearer on broomsticks?" said a concerned but hopeful Anthony.

"I wish that were true, Anthony, but I feel as if we're on the final leg of our journey, which means we'll need to be earth-bound for the sake of accurate tracking. We wouldn't be able to hone in on Merlin from up in the clouds. We'll have to make the rest of the journey on foot."

"Hmmm, I see . . . but if there's still a fair amount of climbing to do, Professor, are you sure you're up to it?" asked Anthony.

"Just about, Anthony, just about," replied Professor Winch.

Anthony was not at all sure of this, but knew he had no option but to go along with his leader.

The broomsticks were buried for a quick retrieval later on, if so needed, and they recommenced their trek and immediately found themselves on a steep climb.

Thankfully, the Hagelbarms were not snow covered, nor did they have hidden and dangerous crevasses, nor were there ravines or narrow ledges.

The ground was mostly bare rock and scree-covered earth, punctuated by

sparse vegetation: twisted petrified shrubs, mosses and lichen. It soon became clear however, that the gradient was becoming an increasing problem for Professor Winch.

There was no particular danger of falling off as such, as the mountain face was as broad and even as it was steep. But there was every chance of an unfit, aged, inexperienced climber of collapsing, and perhaps slipping or rolling back down, which at best would undo a lot of hard work, at worst, result in serious injury or even death.

As their unfortunate colleague Professor Pendragon knew only too well, not all journeys can be made easier by magic, and at times such as these, being a wizard can frequently mean diddly squat.

One thing which did help was that it had not yet become that steep that they needed ropes, turning an already gruelling walk into a very real climb, and a random cluster of what the wizards had assumed to be goat-tracks had so far provided negotiable paths. But Anthony knew that unless Merlin was very near, then the use of ropes would soon become necessary.

Professor Winch's legs were beginning to stiffen and they ached badly, but the perspiring, wheezing and often stooped professor went on, gamely keeping up with his younger, fitter colleague. In truth, the desparity between the older and the younger man was far worse – Anthony was actually taking it easy so as not to totally exhaust nor embarrass his aged mentor.

After struggling on for a couple of hours or so, Professor Winch asked Anthony to stop.

"Are you all right, Professor?" asked a concerned Anthony.

"The truth of the matter is, I am not, but that is not the reason why we have stopped. Thankfully, I think we're in range now, and the magic rooster has one last function to perform."

Anthony breathed a sigh of relief as he had only just unzipped his bag in readiness to make ready the ropes and hooks.

Once again the silver rooster span round and around at high-speed. It slowed, stopped, let out an almighty, 'Cock-a-Doodle-doo!', and nodded its head continually in the one direction.

"Amazing!" said Anthony. "I take it the old fellow's around here somewhere?"

"Correct. It does this when we are within a few feet of Merlin," replied Professor Winch.

They stood looking at each other, not quite knowing what to do next. The rooster had indicated that they had found the right place, but Merlin was still not literally in sight.

"It must be a cave, Professor. Don't forget, a cave doesn't have to have a huge entrance, even the slightest gap in a small outcrop could be it. If you can manage it, we'll zig-zag our way up a little more. This will ensure increased coverage and make sure we don't lose each other."

"Yes, yes, I can manage, just about . . . you that way, me this," said an uncertain Professor Winch.

They began slowly moving up the mountainside, criss-crossing each other every so often, but the ever-steepening ascent made Professor Winch feel even worse. He was so worn out he had to stop and sit down, but his rest was short-lived as there then came a shout.

"Professor! Here! This may be it! Professor!"

With a huge groan, Professor Winch stood and slowly walked over to where Anthony was standing. This was by an entrance to a cave. Rather sadly, what made it seem as if it could be Merlin's abode, although of course its rustic resident could easily be someone else entirely, was that the entrance was covered by a pathetic framework of twigs stuck in the ground, with a torn sheet draped over it. This had not been set up to be a rough and ready entrance or exit, so the two wizards could only assume it either had to be remade each time Merlin left or returned, assuming of course, it was the infamous sorcerer's earthy abode, or, as both men thought more likely, Merlin had never left the cave at all from his very first day as a troglodyte of sorts.

"Yes, this may be it, he always was a scruffy so and so. Let's see if he's here," said Professor Winch.

Anthony pulled at the pathetic twigs and cleared the entrance, but then stood aside allowing Professor Winch to squeeze through first. Both men found themselves in quite a large cave.

"Hello!" shouted Professor Winch. "Hello!" he shouted again.

Professor Winch was nudged by Anthony. "Professor, there he is, look," he whispered.

Anthony had guessed right. This was indeed the centuries old home of Merlin the Magician, friend turned traitor to King Arthur Pendragon.

Professor Winch followed Anthony's finger pointing round to the left, and there, sitting against the wall of the cave, was a very, very old man. His complexion was deathly white and his eyes were a dull grey. He had very long, unwashed grey hair, and his clothes looked and smelled as if they had not been washed or changed since Arthur's wedding day.

They slowly and quietly approached him as they did not want to startle him. Although Professor Winch was certain it was him, he spoke quietly to the old man.

"Are you Merlin the Magician?"

The old man, wheezing badly, slowly turned his head and squinted his eyes at his visitors.

"It-it is I, Merlin. Wh-who are ye, and what de ye want with me?"

The dialect was old English, different perhaps, but still understandable by both Professor Winch and Anthony.

"May I sit with you awhile?" asked Professor Winch.

"Huh huh huh huh!" chuckled Merlin. "And what if I said no, would I be able to stop ye?!" He wheezed and coughed violently with the effort.

"I need to speak with you and ask for your help, Merlin, on a very grave matter indeed. If you help me, I promise you, I will help you," said the

sombre Professor Winch.

The professor sat down next to Merlin, while gesturing for Anthony to lessen his perhaps threatening presence by sitting a little away from the two of them.

"Huh huh huh! I've heard that before, ye know, and not too long ago – and just look at me!" Again he coughed and wheezed as if he was going to die right there and then.

Professor Winch whispered to Anthony to fetch some drinking water. Anthony shrugged his shoulders; Professor Winch frowned.

"From a stream, man! A river, anything! We're that high up here there's no salt in it. Hurry!" Anthony rushed off muttering, while Professor Winch gently took the old man's hand.

"I'm sorry if my friend lied to you, I can only promise you that I will not. Do you recognise this?"

Professor Winch held the miniature weather vane close to Merlin's eyes, which lit up. He knew what it was straightaway and seemed to rally round at seeing it again.

"Bu-but – how de ye come to have it?"

"It's a long, long story, my friend, maybe one day I will explain properly, but it can be yours again, if you'll help me."

"Th-that's what that fool said last time. How do I know you aren't lying as well?"

"The only thing that keeps this world from falling apart, Merlin: trust. You will simply have to believe me when I say that I will indeed let you keep this. I will also aid you in activating its magic so it can restore you to good health."

Merlin sat there with a look of hope in his eyes, but gradually this gave way to the look of mistrust which had controlled most of his life. The evil Merlin could not let go of his hatred, nor his mistrust.

"Ye-ye liar! Begone, and let an old man die in peace!"

"Even if you were to die right now, it would not be in peace. You, Merlin, know this to be the truth."

"Let me die in agony and torment, then. Just begone!"

"Do you mind if I sing you a little song?" asked Professor Winch. Merlin wheezed and chuckled feebly.

"Mad men, the lot of ye! One big liar last time, and now a chuzzling minstrel while I'm abed dying!"

But Professor Winch took no notice, and began to sing quietly to Merlin.

'From the Highlands and Glens, through the Heartlands and Fens. Oer Erin the Green, to the Land of my Father's. May we take heart from you, valiant Arthur the True, and with Merlin the Good, who protects the Round Table. May we fight Arthur's fight, may we light Merlin's light, may we grow in the love, of a friendship so deep. May Arthur's courage always lead us, Merlin's loyalty inspire us. To our grave on from our cot, may we reach our Camelot.'

Professor Winch put his head down in sadness. These were the original words to the '*Magic Anthem of the Magical British Isles*' before the famed sorcerer's betrayal of his Liege and realm. With a tear in his eye he looked to Merlin, hoping it had re-stirred his unblemished loyalty to Arthur and the Crown before greed and evil ambition had taken hold.

"Ye mock me, sir! Ye mock me with words no longer sung! How dare ye, how dare y—"

Merlin once again wheezed and coughed and went a deathly grey colour. Anthony returned with some water in a flask.

"Here, quick! He could be dying! Merlin, take a sip of water, please, it may help!"

But Merlin's deathly pallor had eased, but instead of coughing he was sobbing his heart out. After a minute or so he gestured for some water. Anthony very gently held Merlin in his arms and lifted the flask to his lips.

"Thank ye, kind sir, thank ye. Oh, how proud I was when that song was first sung! I loved him, you know. We were the greatest of friends. Oh, how I regret my betrayal!"

Yet again he sobbed in sorrow and again uttered regret for the harm he had done in times past. He stopped, and smiled. . .

Professor Winch looked with pity upon a foolish old man.

"I know, Merlin, I know. It is never too late, you know? Arthur's kingdom even now needs your help. The realm is in grave danger and you may be able to save it. Will you help, Merlin, please?"

But Merlin was dead.

Professor Winch and Anthony looked at each other in disbelief. They slumped to the ground and leaned against the wall, next to the lifeless body of Merlin, their last hope.

Not knowing quite what to say, Anthony asked, "What now, Professor?"

Professor Winch just shook his head. "I don't know, I just don't know."

The pair were now silent in their own thoughts. After a few minutes they were distracted from their musing. The cave was very gradually illuminated by a white light – but the light soon became so strong that Professor Winch and Anthony had to shield their eyes.

The light eased a little and both men were able to uncover their faces again, only to behold a very strange sight indeed, although the strangeness was more to do with the location and the timing rather than the vision itself. On the opposite wall of the cave was the image of Arthur the True, usually used to herald the singing of the Magic Anthem.

But on this occasion the vision was far more than the usual magically animated Gif which both men had last seen in use at the start of the recent conference in Blackpool. This was the very real spirit of their beloved king, if not actually here, then most certainly now.

Arthur's arm reached out a little into the cave. Even in their state of amazement both men knew that this was a gesture of love and reconciliation.

A voice spoke:

"Come, Merlin, back into the fold, back to Camelot, old friend, where you have been sorely missed. You are forgiven, my friend. You decided to help your modern day kinfolk and your pain disappeared.

"It was your hardened heart that has kept you alive these many centuries, far more than any charm that you placed your trust in. (At this, Professor Winch hastily examined the miniature weather vane).

"You have been kept away from the truth and love of Camelot for far too long. Come, my friend. Guinevere and Lancelot and all our friends – await you at the Round Table. We will rejoice as one – again!"

The spirit of Merlin left the old decrepit body of evil, and returned to be at the side of his friend and master. Arthur smiled at both Professor Winch and Anthony.

"Do not fear, my friends! Although I cannot be with you you in battle against your deadly foe, I can put right a grievous error. It was I who allowed the House of Pendragon to be an unwitting arbiter of doom, so it is I who must cancel out such evil.

"I have many centuries of strong magic stored within me, to complete one more task for the good of my realm, and the world.

"From this moment on, the Book of Chaotagens – is no more! The Chaotagen Wand – is no more! But beware! In the fury of enemies so disarmed will be such a demonic backlash.

"Look to the Citadel of Krickenstaltz! There is your enemy's greatest prize.

"Look to Bucharest! For there will be your greatest victory.

"Look to the young Valiant for he will bring you your greatest glory!

"Farewell, my friends, and may love, truth, justice, and honour – be yours!"

The image of Arthur disappeared. Again Professor Winch and Anthony looked at each other in disbelief but not in desperation.

"Wa-was that really King Arthur, Professor? Did we actually see what we thought we saw?"

"Yes, indeed, Anthony, yes indeed! I know it will take some getting used to, but somehow you will just have to. Now, my friend, Arthur or no Arthur – there are still many dangers ahead and time is short. However, dignity is not something we abandon readily. Let us see to Merlin."

An hour or so later, the body of Merlin had been lovingly laid to rest in a grave by an old oak tree, so symbolic of an Englishman abroad.

They returned to the cave and Professor Winch began to stare into space. He returned to the here and now and gestured for Anthony to sit again, but to remain silent, for he had many things to think about and many revised plans to make.

No Chaotagens? So, no race against time to deactivate them. The threat of absolute chaos had been reduced but not defeated, yet. Even without Arthur's warning, Professor Winch knew that neither enemy would announce demob just because one of their evil ambitions had been smashed. The fight

would go on, just as it had done since King Arthur's time.

But why Krickenstaltz? Why Krickenstaltz? Why Krickenstaltz?! Professor Winch frowned. He knew why.

If the magic of the Chaotagens was gone, as evil as it was, then the magic of Arthur's decrees must also have been negated. Krickenstaltz must be perfectly visible to any local, or foreign backpacker that bimbled through the woods and perchanced upon the magic citadel.

Although Professor Winch did not know it, three very thirsty Australian backpackers had already been banging on the doors, demanding an evening meal, beer, a bed for the night, and more beer.

This could be put right with new magic, but not until such colossal diversion of magic energy as was currently the case, had considerably eased.

He moved on to the young Valiant. Who could this be? He gave a wry smile and unintentionally spoke out loud. "Oh dear! Josh will be pleased, I don't think!"

"I beg your pardon, Professor?" said Anthony, but the professor ignored this.

And his old friend, Aloysius? Professor Winch tutted out loud, and shook his head. In his mind, he said, 'Not this time, Aloysius, not this time – I will pray for you.'

Again Anthony asked what was bothering him, but again the professor did not answer. But eventually. . .

"Anthony, I don't wish to alarm you, but things have unavoidably been brought to a head. We need to get back as quickly as possible. Have you any ideas. . . ?"

Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne smiled, and took off a pendant from around his neck.

"A Whirligig Geometer!"

"A what?!" said Professor Winch, who thought he knew most magic gizmos, but he had never heard of this.

Anthony passed the charm to the professor, who saw it was a little brass globe held in its own frame. Nothing more, nothing less.

"And what is this supposed to do?"

"It's a once only magic time machine, Professor, or at least a travel machine, not quite sure which – if it works, that is! Apparently, we have to hold the globe up, spin it around and say where we are going, but here's the best bit: we, don't actually go anywhere. The world spins around thousands of times faster than normal, but we stay here suspended in exactly the same time and space – until Hemlock Hall catches up with us!"

*

"Two tickets to Heathrow, please – first-class," said a terse Professor Winch at the ticket desk of Otopeni Airport, while Anthony once more consigned two broomsticks, now rather bug-ridden and soily, to the rubbish receptacle in the departure lounge. As for the Capri, to the eternal shame of the two supposedly top-class wizards, they simply hadn't been able to find it again.

"How was I to know it wouldn't work?!" pleaded Anthony, now at the professor's side.

"Where do you say you got it from?"

"Madam Zaragusta, the mystic at Brighton Fair."

"Ha! Seriously though, I need to buy some time. When we get back, I will use the new improved Magichronometer to make up for all this – er – unexpected hanging around."

"What is this delay about, Professor?"

"Possible UFOs – flying over Romanian airspace yesterday."

"Oh, I see. . . "

When they were eventually called to board their flight, they ate, drank and slept.

A few hours later, they were back at Heathrow.

As they were on their way out of the Airport, something caught Anthony's eye – it was the headlines on one of the day's newspapers:

'PRACTICAL JOKE GONE MAD?!
OR NATIONWIDE BALDING DISEASE?'

This was the legend at the top of the Daily Times, with the amazing details taking up most of the front page. Anthony read the beefy bits out loud:

' . . . Early this morning, the nation awoke to find that one in three of the nation's men aged between eighteen and forty-six, were totally bald. Frantic investigations have so far failed to identify the reason or cause. Even Hillary Doubleton of famed children's programme, 'Let's Get To It!', categorically denied that it was part of their annual Christmas Appeal. Prime Minister Boris . . .'

"When Ren Stannich puts his mind to something, there is no stopping him," mused Anthony out loud, to which Professor Winch just smiled.

Anthony saw something fall to the floor. He duly bent down and picked up half of his boss's false moustache, and wondered whether to tell him.

However, both men were then distracted by a message coming through the airport's tannoy. This was a magically redirected and exceptionally loud message, but the wizard responsible had not been overly fussy on refining it to be purely for the ears of Professor Winch and Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne. In fact, the sardonic garage proprietor was glad he had not the requisite magic skill to have done so.

"WHERE THE BLEEDIN' 'ELL IS MY FORD CAPRI?!"

55

As you were, Gentlemen

THEY ARRIVED BACK at Hemlock Hall. To great howls of laughter, Professor Winch realised he was still disguised as Ronaldo Blipp but minus one half of his false moustache. He dashed past Ezekiel, and even Harry Gripweed who had returned to his post after saying he was bored of Magicombe.

Within ten minutes, Anthony, complete with waders and big floppy hat, had resumed his favourite pastime of angling.

Professor Winch was back in his office and he was also back to his staid self. He had a quick sip of brandy and then spoke down the telemagickeraph.

"Ezekiel, would you come through please, we've a few things to discuss."

Shortly after, Ezekiel was sitting opposite Professor Winch who explained what had gone on, but more importantly was to explain what was to happen next.

"Ezekiel, I need to use the Magichronometer. As you now know, Krickenstaltz stands out as clearly as Buckingham Palace, and it is in very grave danger. Because of this, I really do need the chaps currently paint bombing each other or whatever in Thornton, back here now, or more accurately, two nights ago. If it was just a case of dealing with obvious dangers, then I'd just bring them straight back here, as we know the enemy are not hammering down the doors – yet. But I have to think of more subtle things: subterfuge, lone spies getting in unnoticed whereas as an army would be seen, that sort of thing. With this in mind, I am putting together a security force to keep an eye on things over there, so this may as well be made up of our scratch band of irregulars, plus a few more we may be able to press along the way. If we do this quickly, in fact quicker than quick if we do a little time-tinkering, then they can be in place hopefully just before Krickenstaltz becomes visible, but if not, then very soon after."

"I don't want to seem as if I am skeptical in any way, Headmaster," said a dumbfounded Ezekiel Creek, "but how will you square the fact that you will be creating a different timeline? How can that be put right?"

"Very astute, Ezekiel, this very thing does, or at least did, weigh heavily on my mind, but as ever, our two loveable curmudgeons have come to the rescue: they have formulated a little thing called Rapid Time Slipping. All that's needed is to give them the nod during a non-critical period, and they will then set this new magic process in motion. Within a few minutes the timelines become fused without anyone noticing anything untoward – most of the time. . . It can get complicated on occasions, apparently, but as I will be the time traveller in this instance and not Josh and his happy campers,

any such complications, at least in theory, will only affect me."

Although Ezekiel Creek did not want to seem skeptical, he just couldn't help it. He said nothing in reply but just grimaced and shook his head. His friend noticed this but just gave a sad smile before continuing.

"I won't spoil all their fun, but if I return to Tuesday evening that will have at least given them one full day to bond, as Josh puts it. If Professor Cornstone has bonded with anyone, I'll be most surprised. I am telling you this because you will have to prepare the school for any irregularities, once the Magichronometer has been activated."

"Irregularities, Headmaster? What irregularities?"

"The Magichronometer has recently been improved, allegedly, by Septimus and Engelbert. Apparently it was all part of the same R and D project which resulted in the formulation of the new time slipping process. Once this latest version is in use, it does not create a different timeline in quite the same way as it did previously, and as a consequence there will no longer be independent duplications of people across the timelines."

"I don't understand, Headmaster, how is this possible even with magic?"

"I may be the leader of the WFW, Ezekiel – just (and gave a little smile), but Septimus and Engelbert have made Time Magic their life-long vocation. I don't really understand everything myself, but apparently once the Magichronometer is activated, the persons using it assimilate all other versions of themselves, into, well – themselves. . . "

"Oh," said Ezekiel, but still not really getting to grips with the mechanics of it all. "But what do you mean by irregularities? What will happen that needs my attention?"

"In the first instance, you, Tuesday's you that is, will not have a clue as to why I have suddenly changed tack. Unfortunately, there is absolutely nothing I can do about that, but we may get lucky and not bump into each other. But from today, you are forearmed with at least some knowledge and you are to soldier on as best you can, which I know you will do. In a few minutes I will have to leave you temporarily in charge, which isn't any problem as you have done this many times before, but here is the awkward bit. . .

"Although there is every reason to believe that I will return to this timeline, there is an outside chance I will not return at all. If this happens, you are to become the new headmaster of Hemlock Hall and steer the school on in your own inimitable way."

"Headmaster! This is terrible!" exclaimed Ezekiel, while his friend looked on sympathetically.

"I have to be realistic, Ezekiel. I'm sorry, but we do have to consider every possibility."

"How much more must we all suffer at the hands of this madman?" mused a sad and confused Ezekiel.

An anxious Professor Winch knew he had to press on.

"Ezekiel, I must go. I know you will do your best to keep the school on an even keel. Goodbye for now, my friend."

"You may count on me, Headmaster," replied a sombre Professor Creek.

Professor Winch turned the dial of what looked like a hand-held video game, but was in reality an incredibly powerful time machine called a Magichronometer. To the Ezekiel Creek of today, Professor Winch was gone.

As well as all sorts of other pre-programmed Time spells which he had set earlier, Professor Winch had deliberately set the Magichronometer to take him back to well after his Irregulars had left for Thornton, but just before he had departed for Bucharest. He knew that he had not seen or spoken to anyone in this later period of the day. This greatly helped in the prevention of any irregularities or confusion.

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(Two days before. . .) Upon Professor Winch the elder arriving back at Tuesday evening, the two Professor Winch's immediately assimilated into just the one. Upon assimilation, the interloping Professor Winch was given priority. However, he hoped that one of the brand new extra functions on the Magichronometer would actually work, as this was vital for what he had to do. This was the Time Dormancy Exemptor, or TDE for short. This would allow an exception to the new set-up and the rules that went with it. If the TDE is activated, the person using the Magichronometer remains extant but passive, whereas their past or future self would regain full consciousness from their magically induced stasis, and simply carry on doing what he or she was doing before assimilation.

Professor Winch had been warned by both his colleagues that there had to be the gravest of reasons for using any of these extra facilities. He concluded that this was indeed the case, but not just yet, the interloper had a task to perform first, and that was to inform the team builders that they must return to Hemlock Hall. 'Hemlock Hall. . . ?' mused the Professor. 'AAaaarrrgghh!' Professor Winch thumped the desk and swore in Serbo-Croat. They had departed from Krickenstaltz. He sat there sweating, his hands clasped tightly and thinking in desperation as to what he should do. He dragged out the telemagickeraph, slammed it down on the desk and without thinking, yelled down the seashells. "Septimus?! Engelbert?! Can you hear me?! This is very important!"

Septimus dashed off to the Apothecary with whistling in his ears, while Engelbert took the call. "We may be at odds, Gabriel, but really!"

"Sorry, old friend. I need to know if the link between Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz is fully functional yet?"

"Let me see – ah – hmmm, yes – well. . . "

"Engelbert! It is of the utmost urgency, please hurry!"

"Now now, Gabriel, the grave digger in the east never eats until the partridge has made friends with the giraffe and the haberdasher."

"What?!"

"Oh, sorry, you don't watch the reruns of Kung-Fu, do you? No matter. The link is over ninety-five per cent established."

"And. . . ?"

"Oh, oh well, this means that there are no problems at all for adults, teenagers should be OK, but it's still highly dangerous for the infirm or the very young."

"So Mike should be OK?"

"He should be, but there are no guarantees, Gabriel, you of all people should know this. . . Gabriel? GABRIEL!"

Professor Winch had gone.

"Keep running, son, keep running!" chuckled Engelbert at the thought of the forthcoming emergency meeting of the WFW Council.

*

As the decision to recall had not been made until two days after the departure of the awaydayers, and of course, after Professor Winch's trip to Romania, this of course meant that the fun and games in Thornton had indeed carried over to the next day.

Mike and Josh had indeed gone to look at number thirty Burnt Cottage Street, only to end up being told to move on by a rather dotty old lady, Hilda Bassenthwaite, current incumbent, who does not like snoopers. She had recently adopted a stray dog called Mincemeat, who for some reason had taken an instant dislike to Mike and Josh and had chased them all the way back to barracks. Big Bill Dooley and Jez Gildebrand had spent all day in the Steed and Vine before deciding to find Mike's tunnel. They had forgotten to ask Marina to perform her spell, and had ended up destroying centuries of history by making a section of the tunnel collapse in their desperate attempts to get out. The others had gone for a walk down the country lanes and had – accidentally – found themselves outside the Punch Bowl, and – seeing as they were there – had ended up inside.

And then the night-time.

A fair minded Big Bill Dooley had left Professor Cornstone alone for a change and had enjoyed the sight of him doubled up in laughter when he had made the others believe they were a famous troop of Russian acrobats. Edwin nearly burst his lungs laughing after Jez had jumped on the end of the couch which then sent Gregor straight up and through the ceiling. Gregor came back down covered in rubble and dust, but oblivious to this he just knelt and smiled, expecting applause.

As Professor Winch had gone back in time before the awaydaying Irregulars had gone on to enjoy nostalgic trips, destroying tunnels and indulging in some very amateur home acrobatics, one sentence uttered down the telemagickeraph during his time-trip ensured that such things would not happen, despite the mind boggling fact that they had. This little episode would be eventually consigned to what the magic community's boffins call a 'Time-Paradox Event', or 'TPE'.

'This has been great!' thought Mike to himself, as the laughter faded, giving way to a much more sedate but nonetheless pleasantly mellow atmosphere,

until. . .

" . . . Josh, Professor Winch here. I've got to break up the party. You'll all have to come back immediately."

"Why, Professor, what has happened?"

"Nothing bad, rather the opposite, but to make use of this sudden advantage, I do need you all back here as soon as possible."

Josh sighed. He could have argued but he didn't. If it was so important to Professor Winch, then he realised they would all have to go back straightaway. "Fair enough, Professor, we'll be there as soon as we can. See you soon."

"Thank you, Josh. Bye for now," said a relieved Professor Winch, after thinking he was going to have a fight on his hands.

A very uncertain and somewhat forgetful Professor Winch pressed the TDE button on the Magichronometer. Gabriel the First was now back at the helm. Professor Winch the interloper was not at all sure whether anything had happened which should have happened, or indeed if anything had happened which should not have happened, everything just seemed to be the same. He decided to try and find out what was what.

The visiting Professor looked around and his eyes settled on his fountain pen. This was in its holder at the side of the desk. He thought that the simple task of picking it up would be the ideal test, but in his efforts to raise his arm so he could reach out and grab it, he found that he could not do so at all. He very soon realised that with the exception of his eyes, he was totally immobile, he could look around but he could not move independently.

As the interloper mused on such a bizarre state of affairs, his other self decided he wanted a glass of brandy. The incumbent Professor opened the desk drawer, pulled out the bottle, unscrewed the top and poured brandy into the little glass on the table. The visitor now understood the forces involved: he was trapped, although not involuntarily, inside his earlier self. He smiled to himself and was now ready to just let things happen.

Both inner and outer Gabriel sat and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. However, while such inactivity did not bother Tuesday's man one iota, the interloper was getting more and more impatient, until—

"We're here, Headmaster! We're back!" said Professor Cornstone, breezing into Professor Winch's office with Josh, after first telling the others to do their own thing.

At the same time as Professor Cornstone's and Josh Beecham's invasion of their leader's office, someone else's very late return was about to bring some unexpected drama and excitement to the school.

Although Mike should really have had the courtesy to play host to his fellow campers, two of whom were unfamiliar with Hemlock Hall, he just couldn't help himself. He garbled something about, 'See you later!', dashed off to the Camelot common room, walked in the door, and—

"MIKE!"

Two of his friends leapt up from their seats and covered Mike in hugs and kisses, ("Steady on!" said Mike), and hair ruffles from Abigail and Madeline.

From right around the room there were shouts and yells and cries of astonishment, followed by great jubilation and celebration.

As all of the students gathered round, Mike was bombarded with questions.

"How did you get back?!" asked Dutch.

"Is it for good?" asked Abigail.

"What's the food like there?" asked Leo.

"Erm . . . was my Aunt Ezzie around, by any chance. . . ?" slyly asked Madeline.

"Is Juliette better looking than me. . . ?" asked the rather nosy Sarah Biddles, who had begun to take a fancy to Mike over the last year, and had been disappointed at Mike's failure to return on time after the summer break.

A flustered Mike was unexpectedly helped out by Professor Creek, breezing into the common room behind him.

"For goodness sake, folks, let him get some air! Now then, young Miller, don't let this lot wear you out. You will be in need of rest, no doubt, and a good meal, although I suspect under the circumstances the other way round would be more expedient."

The table at the side of the common room was now adorned with red velvet coverings, and was straining to hold the veritable feast that now lay before them all.

"Listen up, everyone, prep' is cancelled! Tuck in!" said . . .

. . .Leo.

Ezekiel gave a little laugh, shook his head at being second guessed, and walked off back to his office to discuss the next government and citizenship lesson with his next guest speaker, King Zanzibar the Twelfth.

"Wish you could come back like this every day," said Leo, first in the queue for the spare ribs.

Once the initial hubbub had lessened, Mike and his closest friends went to the end of the room to have their own conversation. He hoped Sarah would take the hint and give the five some privacy. She did, sort of, but still hovered just within earshot, causing the five friends to resort to whispering, at first.

"So, are you really back for good this time?" asked Madeline, quietly. Mike's smile weakened, a little.

"I just don't know, I hope so, but with all that's gone on I'm not sure of anything."

"You didn't half give me a fright there, Mike, I thought we had lost you for good," said Abigail.

"I thought I'd lost me for good, too!" replied Mike, although still smiling.

"What happened? We've been told bits and bobs but you never know what's true and what isn't," asked Dutch.

Mike did his best to tell them what he could about his captivity and his

rescue, but the rapidly maturing Mike was very prudent with the more gruesome details involving the skirmishes with the enemy. But Mike was soon to realise that exercising such a degree of caution was rather a redundant strategy, as his friends were far more enthralled with his journeys along the tunnel from Thornton to Sefton.

"Brill! We'll have to go back there with you one day, I'd love to do that!" said Dutch, with Leo in full agreement.

"I wouldn't!" said Abigail. "But I would like to see Sefton Church, though."

Madeline smiled. "Did you go into the Punchbowl as well?" she asked Mike.

"You know round there?" asked an amazed Mike.

"'Course I do! Don't forget, it's only down the road from my auntie's house. I've been in Sefton Church loads of times – and the pub!"

"Knowing your lot, that doesn't surprise me!" jokily replied Mike. "But have you been in the tunnel, though?"

But before Madeline could answer, Sarah, who had slyly edged further over, did so first. "If you were there, Mike, I wouldn't be scared at all."

Mike could only cough and blush.

"Blinkin' 'eck, Mike! How many admirers do you want?!" said Dutch. At this, Madeline and Abigail also blushed while Sarah just slyly smiled. Much to Mike's relief she went back to Tobias and the others.

A timely interruption in the form of two of the kitchen staff bringing in extra servings of sandwiches and hot meat pies, brought the momentary awkwardness to an end.

In his enthusiasm to grab as many pies as he could, Leo made a dash for the table, but as he neared his goal the frequently clumsy Leo tripped up over his own feet. He then made a desperate attempt to steady himself by reaching out and grabbing the tablecloth, but of course this was of no help at all and so he stumbled and fell anyway.

Unfortunately for Leo, it was very evident that he was not about to emulate the late great stage magician, Tommy Cooper. He was now on the floor, tangled up in the tablecoth and surrounded by heaps of sandwiches. These were now rapidly being trodden in to the carpet by the startled students. Several bone china plates had also followed suit, landing with a clatter and shattering into many tiny jagged pieces which had scattered all over the common room floor.

But all was not lost. After a precarious wobble or two, the tray of pies rather fortunately came to rest on the edge of the table.

"Oops, sorry, everyone. What a mess!" said Leo, standing and struggling to free himself from his wrappings. "I'm glad these pies survived, though."

"Eat 'em all, then!" said big Baz Blocker, who, although only fifteen, was nearly as tall as Big Bill Dooley and had muscles almost as solid as Jez Gildebrand's.

"What?!" said Leo.

"You heard me! Eat 'em all! Eat the lot – if you can! But I bet you can't!" sneered Big Baz. "But I could . . . I know! Let's have a pie eating contest!"

"Th-that's ridiculous!" said Leo, who despite loving his grub had never been challenged to any eating contest, but word quickly spread around the room.

"Eat! Eat! Eat! Eat! Eat!" was the cry.

Despite his friends telling him to ignore Baz, Leo revelled in one of his rare sojourns into the limelight.

"You're on! Someone split the pies up equally between us, that's it. You there! (Pointing to anyone in sight). You give the signal!"

"OK. Three! Two! One! Go!"

His friends, bar Dutch who was busy with the very catchy, 'Eat! Eat! Eat! Eat!', were shocked at such stupidity. After a few seconds of frantic conferring, Abigail, Madeline and Mike all nodded to each other in agreement. Madeline was to do the honours: firstly, she murmured a spell taught her by her Aunt Ezzie when she was a child, and then she pointed her wand, first of all at the floor which was instantly cleared of all culinary and nutritionary debris, and then it was raised and pointed in turn at Leo and Big Baz.

After she had whispered the incantations for a spell usually used to aid famine appeals and food shortages, neither glutton could get past the first pie. They chewed, gnawed, swallowed and chewed again, but the pie just didn't get any smaller.

As Leo was their friend he was eventually allowed to finish the first pie, but the sly spell-caster again pointed her wand and whispered once more. Big Baz Blocker now thought that for some odd reason, he was eating a marinated rat.

After the girls had confiscated the remaining pies, Leo was declared the winner, but not a very convincing one. While Leo was being booed and jeered, Big Baz stuck his head through the window and spat out the supposed rat pie.

While still looking down, he saw an irate Harry Gripweed, covered in meat, savoury jelly and gravy, looking up and shaking his fists. "To think I gave up a good holiday to come back to this!" But it wasn't too long before Harry was once again laughing to himself and puffing away on his pipe.

While the disappointed mob vented their anger on the two lack-lustre contestants, Mike put his hand to his ear. It was Professor Winch. After a minute or so, he finally managed to explain to the others that he had to go and see the headmaster, but that hopefully he would be back soon.

Earlier, due to a perceived sense of urgency as well as a burning curiosity as to why they had been recalled, Josh Beecham and Edwin Cornstone had played no heed to such customs as knocking and waiting.

"What has happened, Headmaster?! Is there anything wrong?" spluttered Professor Cornstone, as he and Josh Beecham burst into the room.

Professor Winch, biting into a chocolate éclair, was in mid-bite as the veritable whirlwind invaded his office. He looked at Professor Cornstone, then at Josh, then back to Professor Cornstone, and still with the éclair in his

mouth. He removed the éclair and put it down on his desk.

"What are you talking about?! What are you doing back here?!"

Josh looked mystified, and looked to Professor Cornstone, who just shrugged his shoulders.

"But Professor! You asked us all to come back straightaway, and we've all just done that – via Krickenstaltz admittedly – but here we are!" said Josh.

"Are you two stark raving mad?! I haven't asked you to do anything, let alone come back here! Is this one of your pranks, Josh?!"

"No, Headmaster, certainly not! I don't understand this. You told me on the telemagickeraph that there had been developments and for all of us to come back here straightaway!"

At this point, Professor Winch the interloper could not believe what was going on, but the more he thought about it, the more he realised what was happening. It was he and not his earlier self who had called them back, and without thinking of the possible confusion, he had jumped the gun and changed places with himself again before the awaydayers' return. He had to do something, because it was clear that things could not continue as they were. Or could they. . . ? Professor Winch mused as to whether it really mattered.

Apart from the current rumpus, his earlier self would still go to Romania – but with a clear mind after this scene of absolute bedlam? Maybe, maybe not. He knew he couldn't chance it. He decided to regain full control of the situation, although only for a short while, purely to ride the bumpy waves of time with as much wisdom of what is, and just as importantly, of what was. Once things were settled, he would then allow his alter ego in time to take the reins once more.

As the interloping professor now knew, the matching up of the two alter egos meant that the inner Gabriel could only move in exactly the same way as the outer Gabriel. The Magichronometer was in his left side pocket. The only way he could retrieve it was if the outer Gabriel also needed to retrieve something from the same place.

After further bickering between the recalled revellers and the outer Gabriel, the inner Gabriel sensed an opportunity would soon present itself. When het up and at odds with his staff (especially Professor Cornstone), Professor Winch – all versions, all timelines – often resorted to sucking on a peppermint. These were usually kept in his left pocket.

"But Headmaster! Why would we come back?! We were all really enjoying ourselves, especially Mike! We wouldn't up sticks without reason and return here now if that was the case, would we?!" pleaded Josh.

The outer Gabriel was fuming. His left arm began to move! His left hand was reaching down into his pocket! The inner Gabriel kept pace. Bingo! Inner Gabriel retrieved his Magichronometer and Outer Gabriel was very soon venting his anger very forcefully with his tongue on a Colonel Gupter's Hot and Fiery. Inner Gabriel then realised he had a further wait until outer Gabriel either clasped his hands in frustration, or, if things calmed down,

twiddled the fingers of both hands together. This would allow inner Gabriel to make the necessary adjustment.

"Look, gentlemen, it seems to me as if there has been some sort of a misunderstanding. Let's calm down and. . . "

The finger twiddling began, the adjustment was made, and the inner-now-outer Gabriel made a perfectly timed entrance.

" . . . Well done, Edwin! Well done, Josh! There are bad times looming and you have just passed the stress test with flying colours! Sit down, both of you, have a brandy – have two – or three!"

Again, Josh and Edwin looked at each other in absolute disbelief, but they both sat down.

"On this occasion, I think I will. Are you sure you are – er – all right, Headmaster?! The League of Mordred haven't gone and poisoned you again, have they. . . ?"

"Of course not, Edwin. I do apologise for bringing you all back so early, but – er – Mr Mainbrace insisted that due to the current situation, all operatives are stress tested forthwith. So – er—"

"But Mr Mainbrace is from the British Magic Council, Headmaster! All operatives are from the WFW! You are in charge of the WFW!" spluttered Professor Cornstone.

"Did I say Mainbrace? How silly of me. I meant – er – Mainsail, that's it – Billy Mainsail. I appointed him Chief Security Officer yesterday. So if you would be so kind, gent—"

While the bemused but nonetheless amused Josh just smiled at his wily old friend and leader, Professor Cornstone, as usual, would not let go.

"Billy Mainsail?! *Billy Mainsail?!* That useless lump of lard?! I served with him years ago – he wouldn't know an enemy spy if someone looked at him through two eyeholes cut out of a newspaper and whispered the eagle has landed, the wild geese are flying! Headmaster, what on earth possessed you to appoint him?!"

Professor Winch was panicking, but tried not to let it show. "On second thoughts you are right, he's useless."

The under-pressure professor dragged the telemagickeraph out yet again and once more slammed it down on the desk. He had not even set it up properly before he was yelling down the seashells.

"Mainsail! You're fired. Get your things and get out now!"

Billy Mainsail, toad-sweeper for Lesterjestershire Council and former private in the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment, wondered what on earth he had done to deserve the sack. As he walked down the road with his shoulders bowed, his boss sighed – and wondered why his best worker had just walked out.

"Satisfied?" said Professor Winch with pretend sarcasm. He had never previously heard of any such person.

"I didn't mean for you to – er – to sack – er – oh Tosh! Of course I am! You've done yourself a big favour there, Headmaster," said Edwin. "Last time

I saw him, he was in the officers' quarters just standing there holding one of those stupid potato clocks, waiting for the captain to get up. At half past ten!"

"I'm not with you there, Edwin," said Professor Winch. "Neither am I," said a mystified but still amused Josh.

"He was told to get the captain up at eight o'clock!"

For once in his life, Professor Cornstone was able to elicit real rib-tickling laughter from his colleagues. The irony here is that Professor Cornstone never meant it to be a joke, but that did not bother him, as he too finally saw the funny side of his own story.

Professor Winch was glad of the diversion, allowing the laughter to die away naturally before getting back to business.

"I have some news for you both. It is my belief that the Chaotagens are no longer a threat – but, and here is the downside: Krickenstaltz is – er – will soon be visible to one and all. . ."

"But how do you know these things, Headmaster? Has Ren Stannich confirmed this?" asked Professor Cornstone.

"No, no he hasn't, but take it from me that this is the truth. Krickenstaltz needs all hands to the pump – and I mean everyone: WFW, the WSS, what squadrons we have spare, that is. Even Bertie the Jukebox may have to be stuck on the battlements. Edwin, I have to ask you yet again to take a command. This time to head a special security squadron to monitor the outlying areas of Krickenstaltz, perhaps even Bucharest itself. Will you do it?"

"Yes, Headmaster, of course."

"And you, Josh, will you help Edwin? Will you be his SIC?"

"Yes, of course, Professor, once I've got Mike to safety. What about Gregor, by the way?"

"Ah, yes," said a sad Professor Winch, "Gregor: A fine NCO in his usual surroundings, and a brave young fellow and very personable to boot – I'm sure you both know this already. But I think a touch on the quiet side for senior command, at least at the moment. However, I see no reason to break up a good team, so he can still be part of our jolly little bunch of ragtag ragamuffins. . ."

Josh gave a little laugh, and with his earthy and somewhat warped sense of humour he was actually delighted to be thought of as being a member of such a supposedly colourful character-based outfit. But a dumbfounded Professor Cornstone could only mouth in disbelief – 'ragtag ragamuffins?'

Professor Winch, noting but totally ignoring Edwin's state of incredulity, was now thinking on the hoof. He concluded that not only was it best to be economic with the truth, but that a few judiciously planted lies would also have to be thrown in, although of course, they had only become lies after Arthur's intervention. His plans for Mike Miller, however, were absolutely on the level.

"As for Mike. . . " finally continued the professor, "although the immediate threat has passed, I have it on good authority that unless a magic seal is set

around Krickenstaltz by a scion of Pendragon, the danger will return. I don't know how exactly, but that is enough for me to tell you something you will not want to hear. I'm sorry, Josh, but that means Mike, and it means he has to go back once again to Krickenstaltz."

But this time Josh just looked very sad, but not angry. He did not often apologise, but he did so now.

"Professor, I was wrong when I stormed off to Thornton. I let emotions get in the way of the reality of the situation. Although you thanked me later for forcing the warlocks' hand, that was just luck. It could easily have turned out very differently. Please accept my apologies."

"You have absolutely no need, my friend, none at all. Shortly after you did go, Jacinta Morse came out with the most poignant thing I have ever heard in relation to things as they are at the moment: 'We only ever fall out over what is right, never what is wrong. . . '"

"Jacinta, eh? Good lady, one of the best," said Josh.

"Huh! Mrs Morse for Lady Mayoress!" said Professor Cornstone, sticking his fingers down his throat.

"Edwin! That will do!" said Professor Winch, while it was Josh's turn to humph. After a quick glance out of the window, Professor Winch noticed Anthony making his way up to the main entrance. This was something he could well do without at the moment. He nonchalantly waved his wand around and muttered something under his breath.

"Pardon, Headmaster? I never caught that," said Professor Cornstone.

"Oh, I was just thinking . . . maybe it's time for a new wand."

The big oak door of the main building opened wide, and then slammed shut, right in Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne's face. He writhed around in agony holding his broken nose.

"Did you hear something?" said Professor Winch.

"No, what was it?" replied the two at the same time. Professor Winch went to the window.

"Oh dear, Anthony's hurt himself, we'll have to see to him." He then spoke down the telemagickeraph. "Hello, Trixie, are you there? . . . Ah, good. You have a new patient, my dear, he's currently writhing around in agony by the front door. Please see to him immediately if you would, please. Thank you."

Trixie Beecham had gone, but the professor stayed on the line and transferred the call.

"Mike? . . . Mike?! . . . Ah, there you are, that's quite a din there, Mike, something to celebrate, eh? . . . Uhu? . . . Pie eating contest? . . . Leo won?! There's a turn up for the books! Now I am sorry to disturb your fun, Mike, but please come to my office, I need a few words. Thank you."

Five minutes later, Mike the Valiant, despite not wanting to, despite yet again suffering the terrible disappointment of having to leave his old friends behind, once more agreed to go with his elders to Krickenstaltz. Although he thought the presence of Vincent and Juliette would be a great consolation, he was also being a little naïve.

"It won't be that bad, Headmaster. A quick rub-a-dub-dub with the old wand and the seal will be set, isn't that right?" said a now stoic Mike.

"Yes, yes of course, Mike, the old rub-a-dub-dub, couldn't have put it better myself," said the insincere Professor Cornstone, while Professor Winch, still with his mouth open ready to speak, was, like Josh, absolutely dumbfounded at the man's cheek. What was worse, he even ruffled Mike's hair!

Professor Winch did not conveniently tell either Edwin or Josh that the link between Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz was as good as official, he preferred to let them think that their return by such a route had been a one-off, an exception to the rule and not entirely risk-free. Although such technicalities never bothered Josh, he knew that Professor Cornstone was far more of a stickler over such things, and this made things a little easier, especially as time, or perhaps timing, was of the essence. He could not have them arriving before the kindly intervention of the spirit of King Arthur, which ironically had left Krickenstaltz vulnerable.

The professor took a huge bundle of funny money more usually known as fifty pound notes from his safe, and passed it to Professor Cornstone.

"OK, folks, time you were off. Please gather up your fellow Irregulars and fly to Bucharest – best go right now and get the earlier flight. Once there, use Galleron's Cabs if you can, I have an account with them – and then head for Krickenstaltz. I will join you when I can."

Josh and Edwin both said their goodbyes, but Mike was just standing there thinking. Professor Winch, perhaps unwisely, had not told him absolutely everything that had happened.

"I thought Krickenstaltz is invisible and it can only be reached using magic?" asked Mike.

But Professor Winch was actually ready for this one, but his answer still depended on Mike not dwelling on the nuances of the situation. The professor gave a big audible sigh.

"Mike Mike Mike! You can see it, ordinary folks can't . . . you can do magic, ordinary folks can't. Does that answer your question?!"

"Yes, sorry, Professor, wasn't thinking. Well, see you soon, bye," replied Mike, who did not see the fragility in his headmaster's explanation.

"Bye, Mike."

Professor Winch allowed himself a self-congratulatory smile. He felt confident enough to allow his earlier self to make a comeback, knowing he could reassert himself on the situation should the need arise. Although what did slightly unnerve him was the fact that once his earlier self had yet again tried in vain to save Merlin, it did not really seem to matter whether the younger or older Professor Winch took the reins. Despite still being uncertain as to what was actually for the best, the ironically amused Professor Winch shrugged his shoulders, did an eeny meeny miny mo on his fingers, smiled once more, and yet again activated the TDE.

A few minutes later on the roof of Hemlock Hall, Professor Winch and

Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne were mounted and ready for a long journey on broomsticks – again.

"Ready?!" "Ready!"

56

The Sly Old Dog

BOB COUSINS AND LENNY HEWITSON were two very lucky men indeed. The two League of Mordred members had been downstairs looking in the cellars and store rooms of the Steed and Vine Public House for the troublesome Mike and Estella, when all hell had let loose. This was when the very hung over Warlocks of Bucharest had set about obeying the command from their bloodthirsty leader Kerantzky, to slaughter every one of the League that had had the misfortune to be in the pub. They had heard the commotion and the blood-curdling screams, and not surprisingly had decided to hide.

The two bided their time, waiting for the best opportunity to make a dash for freedom. This came when the skirmish between the caravaneers and the warlocks was at its height. They broke from cover, dashed out of the door and across the pub car park, and away down the lane – taking them away from the fighting. Within a few hours they had managed to contact their Southern Province comrades, and not long after that were safely ensconced within the League of Mordred's top secret camp somewhere in the Home Counties. After regaling the whole of the company with tales of death-defying heroics, paying particular attention to the details of how they had overcome Kerantzky and had left him for dead, they were immediately rewarded with the much desired position of personal assistants to none other than their inglorious leader, Professor Gemini Zenith.

Their first task was to help their master decamp, temporarily, to a private caravan in a holiday camp in North Wales. This was on the Isle of Anglesey – a cold, rainy, windswept headland which can only ever attract the more hardy type of British holiday-makers, particularly keen anglers and sea-fishing enthusiasts.

Two such fishermen were Ben Walsh and Tony Hughes. Both men hailed from the Royal Town of Windsor, which is in the home county of Berkshire. They made the long journey each Friday evening to enjoy a weekend's fishing. Ben, a descendant of Sir Bernard of Bootle, was only average height and balding, while the older man, Tony, was a small, dour-faced man with a face with so many knobbles it was like an old potato.

To occasionally break up the monotony of a disappointing fishing trip, they often used binoculars to do some bird watching. Ben passed the binoculars to Tony and gestured for him to look southeast, down onto the Llan Marras Caravan Camp. "I can see the vultures now," said Tony. What he had actually seen were two men, one of whom was pushing someone in a wheelchair. "And if they're not wigs and false 'taches, I'm Anne Robinson."

In the wheelchair was someone who seemed to be small and frail, and perhaps quite ill. Although Tony and Ben knew otherwise, any other end of season holiday-makers walking about the camp would no doubt have assumed the person to be a sickly old man. Although the person's face and body was covered in blankets, sticking out at the bottom were a pair of badly scuffed, fake-fur-lined slip-on old man shoes. The two men escorting the wheelchair-bound mystery person were none other than Bob Cousins and Lenny Hewitson, wearing rather unconvincing wigs and false moustaches to try and disguise themselves.

Upon reaching caravan 88S, the door opened. A young boy with short cropped brown hair and sinister black eyes stepped down and assisted the two men to lift the old man out of the wheelchair and into the caravan. The wheelchair was folded up and slotted in to the very narrow gap down the side of the bed in the largest bedroom. Professor Zenith was then helped into a large, plush leather armchair which had been brought from his evil island citadel up north. He simply could not do without all of his comforts, even if it meant ripping out the traditional fittings of the British caravan and leaving precious little room for his underlings to be comfortably seated.

The caravan in Anglesey had long been a bolt-hole for the evil professor whenever he needed to return to the mainland. Although a small island, Anglesey was only a short trip across the Menai bridge from the Welsh town of Bangor.

The broad-shouldered, six feet two inches Professor Zenith, in fine fettle for a two-hundred and thirty-year old wizard, stood and beckoned Hewitson and his son to untie his long lanky legs from behind his back. As this was being done, he removed the novelty baldy-wig from his head, revealing a thick, wiry mass of long black hair. Finally, he wiped off the ashen coloured make up from his face to reveal two ruddy red cheeks.

"Thank you, Lenny, thank you, boy. I can see you are being well trained by your loyal father."

"Thank you, Professor," said Lenny Hewitson.

Both Zenith and Hewitson the elder engaged in a sickly smiling silence while looking at the young boy.

"Oh – oh sorry, Professor Zenith, yes, thank you," replied a blushing David Hewitson.

"No matter, my boy, no matter, but you will learn soon enough. Gentlemen, we have much to discuss. Is your son – er – hungry, Len?"

"Here, lad. Go and get a burger or something." Hewtison passed his son a ten pound note.

"It's too late in the season, Father, the burger bar is closed," replied the sullen David.

"Go into town, then!"

"What?! Llanfair and all the rest of it?! It's a dump, especially this time of year. Ow!"

David Hewitson immediately regretted crossing his father.

His shoulders slumped and his head went down. He sighed and commenced the long, tedious, slow walk which would take him right out of the camp and along the country lanes to — Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllanty-siliogogogoch – rubbing his reddened ear as he went.

It was raining and windy as he passed the quarry at the far end of the camp. He picked up several small rocks and stones and flung them at the quarry face. The young Hewitson, far more used to exotic hideaways in the tropics of the southern hemisphere, resented being stuck in this windy, cold, barren wilderness. He began to imagine that those who had brought him here were on the receiving end of each rock thrown.

"Here's one for you, Father! Bringing me to this dump! Better still, the whole rotten clan!"

David threw a handful of stones as hard as he could at the quarry face. He rubbed his ear once more, pulled a face and spoke in a silly squeaky voice not resembling his father in the least. "It's time to learn your real trade, son!"

He walked on until he finally reached the small Welsh town which could only ever boast about its incredibly long name – in fact, the longest place-name in Great Britain – and not much else. Out of sheer boredom he went into the railway station to look at the town's name, written in full. He was to be disappointed. On occasions, perhaps through lack of space after platform improvements or after a general refurbishment of the entire station, the sign sometimes only states a convenient abbreviation of the town's and station's full name — "Llanfair PG?! What a swizz!"

He sullenly marched back out of the station, pulled tongues at the little lady in traditional Welsh dress doing her best to give away tiny fragments of Welsh Rock, and walked into the burger bar next door. Co-incidentally, this was at the same time as Ben and Tony came in to take a well-earned break from their fishing.

Although it received odd, disapproving looks from the staff and some of the customers, Ben decided to adjust his fishing rod in the hope that it may improve his catch later on. The trouble was it was difficult to control and the rod line dangled right in front of David Hewitson's nose. After a minute or so, Ben profusely apologised and decided to give up and pack the rod away.

"Will it fool them, do you think?" whispered Tony.

"Hmmmm . . . in the dark, maybe, but I've caught bigger fish with this so we should be all right."

The teenage boy with short cropped brown hair and sinisterish brown eyes left the café to make the long walk back to Llan Marras. The proprietor looked across at the other teenage boy, just sitting there staring down at his burger. He went across to see if he was all right. "Are you OK, son?" he asked.

"Yes – fine – thank you," said the teenage boy in a strange, boring, monotonic voice.

The man tutted. "Teenagers. Miserable gits, the lot of them."

Back in the caravan, Professor Gemini Zenith was putting the finishing touches to his plans to take on the might of the WFW.

"Gentlemen – let us make plans. Despite the debacle in Thornton, I still have the Southern and Celtic Provinces. If we combine in one final push, then not only will we reign supreme over the British Isles, but the whole world will soon be ours. With this in mind, I want you to issue orders for all to assemble here this evening.

"As for the ambitious Lieutenant Zezk, I have not been able to make contact. If he is still alive, I can only assume that he and the rest of the warlocks have gone back to Romania."

"But what of his treachery?!" asked Cousins, panicking – in case the truth came out about his and Hewitson's cowardice.

Zenith gave a rather wicked smile.

"Do not worry on that score, my friends, I will have my revenge, our revenge – but not yet, not while we need them. I will play along with them. It would not surprise me if Zezk puts all the blame on Kerantzky. I will of course, accept this as being the truth – for now. Well, Lenny, let us make our next move, please unlock the trunk and bring me the Book of Chaotagens."

Hewitson walked back up a couple of paces until he was roughly in the middle of the caravan. This was actually the kitchen area, defined as such by the simple virtue of there being a stove located to the right of the caravan door. He opened a little wall cupboard usually used for crockery and pulled out a small, heavily padlocked trunk. He placed this on the unit top and carefully unlocked it. At first he just looked down, but then his face froze in an expression of horror.

"Hurry it up, we have much to do," commanded Professor Zenith.

Hewitson gulped. Cousins saw this and ran over to see for himself. They looked at each other, ashen-faced –and just shrugged their shoulders. Hewitson turned to face his master.

"P-P-Professor, the book has gone. The Book of Chaotagens has gone!"

"You know the price of failure! Both of you! Where is the book?!"

"But Professor, I do not know! It was here, locked up in the trunk, but it has gone!"

"Who else has keys that fit the trunk?!"

"No-one, Professor Zenith."

"Does the case look damaged? Is the lock still in one piece?!"

"The case has not been damaged, Professor, and there is nothing wrong with the lock!"

Both Cousins and Hewitson indeed knew the price of failure. They had visions of being fed to Zenith's pride and joy. This was an urban wolf-whale named Thor, which he kept as a pet and was indeed partial to the odd, extra-special treat of League members, who in their master's eyes had failed in their duties.

Zenith was already working out the wording of the classified advertisement he would place in that night's issue of the '*Magic Times*' for new servants,

when the whole room was suddenly illuminated by a strong white light. On the end wall suddenly appeared the image of King Arthur, as had happened to Professor Winch and Anthony in Merlin's cave. They all had to shield their eyes at first, but eventually the light softened and they were able to look. They now beheld the image of a grim-faced King Arthur, pointing his finger at them. His voice boomed out.

"To you, the bringers of evil and torment! The Book of Chaotagens – has gone! The Wand – has gone! I have destroyed them once and for all! But the people of my realm still face their sternest test, even greater than the threat from the evil Merlin of old, and Mordred his murderous ally whom you wickedly still pay allegiance to.

"If love, truth, courage and honour are in their hearts, you – the evil Gemini Zenith – will soon be as the book and the wand . . . should they not be of stout hearts, tragedy and chaos will soon rule the world.

"I cannot stop you, for Camelot is no longer of your world, but I have removed the evil that I foolishly helped bring into my realm. Beware, men of evil – the tide is turning!"

Arthur was gone.

Hewitson and Cousins were worried men. They knew that when things went against his master, he could be just as irrational as Kerantzky ever was. They would not have been surprised if they had got the blame for King Arthur's unwelcome intervention. Cousins looked down, worried about what the next few moments might bring. Hewitson nervously glanced at Zenith and was highly surprised to find him grinning.

"Professor! What is so funny?" asked a confused Hewitson.

"Spirits of the past do not scare me, Hewitson! He has only been able to destroy the book because the magic surrounding it was largely his magic. No, no, he is bluffing to try and save his beloved realm. Victory will still be ours!"

"Y-yes, Professor Zenith," said an entirely unconvinced Hewitson. Cousins was reluctant to say anything at all so just meekly nodded.

At that moment, Zenith pulled a face and put his hand to his left ear. A voice spoke in his mind. It was Zezk.

"Greetings to you, our friend and ally, Professor Zenith," said Zezk, in a magically altered voice, based on the RP accent of his unlikely ally.

"Ah, yes, hello, Zezk."

"First of all, Professor, I have some tragic news for you. A few days after we had joined your men in Thornton, we were ambushed by nineteen squadrons of WSS scum. I'm sorry to say that all of your valiant comrades died in battle and only a handful of my men survived. I am ashamed to say it, but Kerantzky was negotiating surrender with the enemy. I had no option but to remove him and take command."

"This is tragic news indeed, Zezk, but at least it's good to know that my men fought to the last."

"Er – yes – now onto some other important matters. Unfortunately, the

enemy has somehow magicked away the Chaotagen Wand, but even so there is still good news. Our prisoner, the older scion of Pendragon, has broken under torture and has told us of another way to release the Chaotagens. You must somehow come back to Romania as soon as you can. Bring the book with you and we will find and destroy their magic citadel."

"Bring the book, you say?" said a smiling Zenith. "If you are convinced that we can still bring chaos upon the WFW and the world, then we will join you as soon as we can."

"Thank you, Professor Zenith. You and your men will receive a hearty welcome from the Warlocks of Bucharest. Farewell, for now!" said Zezk, who then sniggered but made sure this was not telepathically transmitted. "Vee vill kill ze English secondz after zey arrivez! Zen ve vill rule ze vorld!" he vowed.

"Farewell, my friend! We look forward to your hospitality!" replied Zenith, smiling and chuckling but only to himself. "What a load of old tosh!" he added, turning to his worried servants.

"Who was that, Professor?" asked Hewitson.

"It was Zezk, and just as I thought, he was lying. He said that nineteen squadrons of the WSS attacked our camp in Thornton. He also said that the old professor has found a new way of releasing the Chaotagens, but he will still need the book to do so, and because of this Zezk wants us to take the book out to him in Romania as soon as possible."

"And is this part true, Master? Would the book really have been of any use without the wand?" asked Cousins, looking up and at least a little hopeful that recent events involving him and his colleague had become muddled in the confusion, and muddied in the mists of time.

But this was in vain. Zenith was fully aware of his servants' cowardice and lies and always had been. The procurement of Cousins and Hewitson had really just been a shopping trip – for pet food. Both would die, but not just yet – he needed them alive for at least a little while longer. He tutted, shook his head, and postponed their grisly execution for a month.

"Don't you understand anything, Cousins? He wants to wipe us out! The book is just a blind because he must know that it's gone, but he doesn't want us to know that he knows! His plan is to get us over there under false pretences, see us all settled snug and toasty in their lovely wattle and daub chalets, carry out an ambush in the dead of night, wipe us all out – and take all the power and glory for himself!"

"So we are not going to go over there?" asked Cousins.

"How long have you been in politics, Bob?"

"I'm not in politics, Professor."

"Didn't think so. Yes of course we are going to go over there! If we know we are going to be ambushed, then we make sure that that doesn't happen and better still, we ambush them! Whatever they do know of the WFW, if anything, we will get it out of Zezk before he dies.

"Now – both of you, do as I say and arrange for the entire British Isles

provinces to gather this evening. Tell them that they must all be fully equipped and ready for a trip to Romania."

"But you were driven out only days ago! What if it happens again?!" exclaimed Hewitson.

"They were lucky, that's all, lucky. I could see that they were thin on the ground and that they were to have a long journey home. Vlad and his stupid impalas won't want to repeat that trek too often, so we do what they do not expect and return straightaway."

"Yes, Professor," sighed Lenny, still nowhere near convinced of his master's strategy, and like Bob Cousins, totally unaware that he only had a month to live.

At that point, the teenage boy with short cropped brown hair and sinisterish looking brown eyes opened the door and stepped into the caravan, just as the lights went out.

"I am sorry, Professor, but there appears to be a power failure all over the camp. I'll fetch the candles," said Hewitson, while peeking out of the window and seeing that the whole camp was in pitch darkness.

After a somewhat noisy rustling and scrubbling through the bits and pieces dragged out of a small cupboard to the right of the stove, a candelabra was found, dusted down and placed on the coffee table in the middle of the tiny sitting area at the end of the caravan. Three candles were placed in its branches and then lit.

While this was being sorted, the young boy had taken himself off to sit in silence at the small breakfast bar, this was roughly in the middle of the caravan, opposite the kitchen area. The three men began to pore over maps and intelligence reports, and went over the yet again revised plans for victory over the WFW and their allies, and even the warlocks.

However, it soon became clear that the dim light of the candles was not quite good enough to study the small and highly detailed maps. Hewitson sighed and pulled out his wand. He was about to utilise its illuminative qualities but found the wand suddenly knocked out of his hand.

"No, Len, the camp's night staff or maintenance crew may be about, may even come calling. I don't want any complications," said Zenith, who also believed in the old adage: 'Peel potatoes with a knife – save the magic for the strife'.

"Sorry, Professor, wasn't thinking," said Hewitson, in a small, pathetic, penitent voice. Nevertheless, a perfectly ordinary solution was required.

"I could go and ask the maintenance man if he can give us a portable generator?" suggested the boy. A deadpan Zenith gave the briefest of glances in the boy's direction and gave the slightest nod.

Lenny Hewitson was pleased and relieved that Zenith appreciated the boy's willingness to help, and duly dispatched him to the camp office – just as the lights came back on. A tired looking teenage boy with short cropped black hair and sinister black eyes came straight back in.

"Dad, I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"OK, son, but I'll have to wake you in a couple of hours, we have a long journey to make later on." David nodded and went off to the smallest of the three bedrooms in the large caravan.

*

A few days later. . .

Profesor Winch, the interloping version, was sitting in his office musing over both recent events and things yet to happen.

The decision to allow his alter ego to regain full control had backfired – a little. The original version in his own timeline had been perfectly happy and contented, but the visiting professor had soon realised that there was at least one minor drawback: he had become a somewhat frustrated back-seat driver. Further complications came shortly after, in the form of both versions now being fully aware of recent useage of the magichronometer. Knowing that there was no ideal way forward, the interloper chose expedience and had once more taken the reins.

Professor Winch had only just settled down again after earlier receiving a call from the two time-tinkering elders of Krickenstaltz. This was to inform him that the process of Rapid Time Slipping could commence.

Engelbert Osbaldeston had simply asked Professor Winch to "Take it easy for an hour or so".

An unusually worried Professor Winch had remained seated, with his heart thumping and beads of sweat trickling down his temples.

The process had not taken an hour to complete, not even half an hour, not even fifteen minutes. Less than a minute after the complex Time Slipping spell had been set in motion, a panic stricken voice belonging to Septimus Twigg had yelled down the telemagickeraph.

"Gabriel?! Gabriel, old friend, are you still there?! GABRIEL! SPEAK TO ME! OH MY GOD! GABRIEL!"

Professor Winch almost fell out of his seat.

"YES! YES I'M HERE! WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?! HAS IT ALL GONE WRONG?!" replied the white-faced Professor Winch.

"Go and get some dinner. All done. All fine," came the reply from Engelbert, with a demonic chuckle in his voice. Professor Winch went from deathly white to red to a deep angry purple, and swore at his two mischievous colleagues - this time in perfectly plain English. This was a waste of his vocal chords as Septimus and Engelbert had already gone, chuckling to each other as they walked down one of the bleak passageways of Krickenstaltz. Although they had decided not to bother with a full meeting of the Council, which meant that they were not going to officially censure their leader after all, they were nevertheless determined that Professor Winch, as we have just witnessed, was not going to get off scot-free. But they'd now had their revenge – and their fun. All was now forgiven and forgotten.

Once Professor Winch had calmed down, which was achieved as usual with the aid of some brandy, he realised that everything seemed just the same. If

his colleagues had indeed managed to fuse the two separate timelines, and he had no real reason to doubt that they had not, then he just couldn't see the join. He did, however, sense that his alter ego was still part of his very being. He had already guessed that though Assimilation was a very closely related branch of magic to the process he had caused to be activated, it was not exactly the same, the upshot here being that any alter egos created remain in the new unified timeline. This wasn't an insurmountable problem for the elders of Krickenstaltz, but the process to bring about a resolution would require an inordinate level of magic energy. "Hey-ho," said Professor Winch to himself, which basically meant he would worry about such things when such things needed worrying about, which thankfully was not now. He could dwell no longer on such things anyway, as Ben Walsh had come through on the telemagickeraph to give his boss a progress report.

" . . . Yes, that's right. Romania," said Ben Walsh.

The professor greeted the news with a grim satisfaction.

"Good good. Things are moving along more smoothly than I had ever dared to hope for. Come, join me in a quick snifter."

A glass of brandy appeared right in front of Ben's nose. Ben smiled and picked it up. This was quickly followed by another glass held by a hand which was attached to a burgundy-sleeved arm which was protruding out of a pleasant pastille-blue mist.

"Cheers!" came the toast, seemingly from somewhere within the mist. "Cheers!" came Ben's reply. "Clink!" went the glasses as they touched for a second.

"Thanks for that, Ben," said Professor Winch, "a smart piece of work that, well done. And now, old friend, onwards and upwards as they say, call again when you have more. Bye for now."

"Will do, Professor. Bye-bye."

Ben Walsh had gone and Professor Winch now began pondering over what was to happen next. He decided first of all to contact an old friend and colleague, Colonel Max Carton, to see how the brand new ghost army of ten-billion broomstick Bennys were getting on.

"Hello, Colonel Carton? . . . Yes, Professor Winch here. How are things holding out?"

Colonel Max Carton was a veteran of the Leprechaun and Shet-Nam Wars, and although approaching retirement still felt as if he had one major campaign left in him, a sentiment echoed by Professor Winch.

"Very well indeed, Professor, I am highly impressed. Your colleague from Krickenstaltz certainly knows his onions, doesn't he? He has managed to make it look as if nine-billion soldiers are covering the skies from Brighton to Unst, and all of the west coast as well. I've never seen anything like it."

Professor Winch, although pleased, was still a little concerned over numbers.

"That's good to hear, Colonel, but – erm – I don't wish to sound ungrateful, but wasn't it supposed to be ten-billion?"

"Ah, yes, I thought you would mention that. The eminent professor assured me that a spell of such magnitude will always incur a failure rate, perhaps as high as twenty percent. By his calculations, the safety margin for total coverage was eight-billion, so everything is easily within the accepted tolerance."

"But what of the other billion?"

"Don't worry, Professor, part of the spell involves a magnetic device which makes any failures drift off to the far north where they'll eventually evaporate. There is a slight risk of sightings by ordinary folks, but not for long."

"Very well. And what of Zenith? Has he attempted to force an exit?"

"Yes, Professor, he has made several attempts over the last two evenings. He tried to get through our imaginary army at Folkestone, then Grimsby, and then even as far up as Newcastle. It has fooled him up to now, but I'm not sure for how much longer."

"Yes yes, I know what you mean. Although we sprung both Estella and Mike with the same spell, I don't think he would have been fooled had he been there; but soldiers all look similar in uniform and that's why he's not certain, but no doubt he is suspicious. Colonel Carton, this is going to seem a strange request: if they try again tonight, please let them through."

"Let them through! Whatever for, Professor?!"

"A little patience is the order of the day here while I do my best to explain. Since the recent escalation, ourselves and the enemy have done nothing but stalemate each other. That's OK in the short-term but ultimately it does not solve a single thing, and it certainly doesn't win wars.

"The thing is, our own troops and allies are very thin on the ground, so are Zenith's. However, I believe we can bring matters to a head in Romania, but to ensure things go as planned we will have to let our own bubble burst, so to speak, thus letting Zenith know he was being duped, this is vital. However, that is for me to worry about.

"Now assuming they do try again this evening, then I want you to let them through, then with as many troops as possible pursue them all the way to the warlocks' camp. Our men will find themselves in a highly unusual situation: the warlocks will be both their enemies and their allies."

"I don't understand this at all, Professor. What do you mean, enemies and allies?"

"Precisely that. The warlocks do not intend to ever share power with Zenith, whether here, in Romania, or throughout the world. They are planning to ambush The League of Mordred upon their arriving back in Romania. With a little luck, Colonel, we can as strange as it may seem, assist the warlocks. Afterwards, we will hopefully be able to apply the old adage, one down, one to go?"

"You sly old dog!"

"I heard that!"

"You were meant to."

"Oh. Rightyo, Colonel, I will leave the mustering of the pursuit army to you, can you manage this?"

"Yes, Professor, I will see to it straightaway."

"Unless you have anything else to tell me, then I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, Professor, I will speak to you again soon. Bye for now."

"Bye-bye."

Professor Winch nodded to himself and gave a little smile as a sign that things were shaping up quite nicely. He poured himself another small brandy, took a sip, and then contacted Krickenstaltz.

"Hello, Edwin, Professor Winch here. Have you anything to report yet?"

"Hello, Headmaster. Not much at all really. Stunned locals have been asking us if we are a film crew making a new Robin Hood or King Arthur film, and there has been a steady stream of back-packers wanting to stay. After getting rid of the first crowd who had taken their muddy boots off and were all over the place before we could stop them, we erected an emergency fence to deter any others."

"And what of the environs?"

"Again, nothing. Josh and I split up. He teamed up with Ernst, and I've had Liebe – er – Anthony with me.

"It's a massive area to cover, Headmaster, but we've done our best. We criss-crossed all the way, in all directions, and even went as far as Bucharest. We even had Alex driving up and down at differing intervals just in case we missed anything, but nothing so far. We will of course try again once everyone's rested. One thing, though: this fellow Alex oddly keeps muttering how much quicker he could do the job – if he had a Ford Capri. . ."

Professor Winch ignored this last observation and moved on quickly.

"How is Mike getting on?" he asked, more out of curiosity at Professor Cornstone's rather surprising civilised manner. He had just said the name Josh instead of Beecham. How would he refer to Mike?

"Fine, Headmaster, Mike is just fine. He is spending all day with the Stannich children, and that Nellie, I think her name is – you know – the cowgirl?"

"Her name's Ellen and she's a chef and waitress," said Professor Winch, while thinking, "One step at a time, Gabriel, one step at a time".

"Sorry, they all seem the same to me," said Professor Cornstone.

"And how is Ren getting on with the defences?"

"Ah, yes, he did tell me something. He has ordered half of the Cavalry Regiment to make a camp all around the Academy, while the other half are permanently posted within the Academy itself. He was going to contact you himself, has he done this yet?"

"No, not yet, but I suspect he has been busy, but I am sure we'll catch up with each other soon. And what of the others, Edwin, are they OK?"

"Yes, Headmaster, they are fine. Grant is using the time to teach the others the different spells that can be used with battle-wands, while Big Bill

is going through some self-defence techniques, mostly non-magic in origin – but it all helps. Er – that brings me to Jezmond. He's a big strong man all right, but does he have any skills we can utilise in battle?"

"He can sit on 'em!" replied Professor Winch, which brought a chuckle from both men. This was followed by an awkward silence, letting Professor Winch know it was time to move on. "Unless you've anything further to add. . . ?"

"No, I think that's it for now, Headmaster, but if something crops up I will contact you," replied Professor Cornstone.

" . . . Then we shall leave it there for now. Thank you for that, Edwin, that was very informative, but now I must go as I have other calls to make, besides, I am dying for a slash. Goodbye for now, Edwin."

"Goodbye, Headmaster."

Professor Winch, after a quick trip across the lobby, deliberated over whether he should tell all of his colleagues at the Academy of his strange decision to let Zenith flee the country. He decided not to as he felt that to do so may well distract them from their own separate yet equally important tasks. Professor Winch scratched his chin. Who was next?

"Vlad? Gabriel here. Any developments?"

"Hello again, Professor. At this moment in time, Gabriel, you and your people are very lucky indeed. The warlocks have not yet come across Krickenstaltz, they simply have not realised wha has happened, but be assured – they will know soon enough. As for our old friend Aloysius, I don't rate his chances of survival once the warlocks realise he is of no use to them."

"Very worrying, Vlad, very worrying indeed. It's a good job they still wish to infiltrate Krickenstaltz, otherwise he would be dead already, but I may be able to help him before it is too late.

First though, old friend, I need to ask a favour of you and your loyal subjects, if I may. . . "

"If I and my herd of impalas can readily oblige, then we will of course do so. What is it you wish of us, Professor?"

"I need you and your army to supplement the defences of Krickenstaltz until our own army is ready."

"We will do that gladly, Gabriel, but I thought you were not now reinstigating the Magic Army?"

"Things have been changing constantly, Vlad. It's nothing but a headache, but I've had no choice."

"I understand, Professor. I will give word to my commanders to make arrangements to move across the plain this evening. You were saying about helping Aloysius?"

"Ah, yes, no guarantees as ever, but I think one final outing as my dear friend Ronaldo may do the trick. . ."

"It may do, Professor, but can I suggest something?"

"Yes, Vlad?" said a puzzled Professor Winch.

"Use magic for your moustache. I'm afraid you have been the laughing

stock of the herd for the last few days, word gets round fast."

An embarrassed but smiling Professor Winch totally ignored this.

"I hope to see you soon, Vlad. Thanks again, old friend. Bye for now."

"Bye, Groucho," said Vlad.

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Zenith banged his fists on the arms of his plush leather armchair.

"There is something definitely not right, If I could only think what it is."

Hewtison looked first at his son and then at Cousins, and gave what he thought was a barely noticeable shrug. Unfortunately—

"Do not make me out to be an imbecile, Hewitson. Any more of that and you will be thrown down into the pit," said Zenith, quietly but firmly, with that threatening glint in his eye. The pit in question was none other than the lair of the permanently hungry Thor. It would have been no great problem to Zenith to waive the one month's notice for either or both of the pair, and re-advertise in that evening's '*Magic Times*', but Professor Zenith's mind was on more serious matters.

"I don't get it," said David Hewitson, not to either his father or to Professor Zenith in particular, but more to himself, but he had been heard.

"What don't you get, my boy?" said Zenith, who often looked to the less world-worn mind of the young for answers.

David, glad that his off the cuff comment had unexpectedly achieved gravity, was only too glad to share his thoughts, but his father looked worried, hoping his son's naïve comments would not incur his master's wrath.

"How can there be so many? If they have every inch of the sky covered all around the British Isles, where have they come from? It would take billions of soldiers to do that. The total population of Britain and Ireland combined comes to nowhere near a single billion!"

Lenny Hewitson was panicking.

"The WFW is a global concern, son. They have probably got reinforcements from around the world – the WSS, the Magic Rangers, the lot!"

Hewitson had said this to try and prevent an angry situation developing, but David wasn't finished.

"What?! All with the same insignia?! On every uniform I saw there was WFW/WSS GB – on every single one!"

"You must have just noticed the British WFW! But there's probably all sorts up there! Americans, Jamaicans, Australians! Everyone! Please, son, let the Master and I—"

"Let him speak! Go ahead, boy," interjected Professor Zenith, desperate for answers. But David saw his father mop his heavily sweating brow.

"Well – er – maybe Father is right. I can't see everyone at once, can I? Maybe I just saw the British."

But the seeds of doubt had been sown in Zenith's mind. "Or maybe not, boy, maybe not!" retorted the professor.

A tense silence filled the room as Professor Zenith went into deep-thought

mode. Lenny and his son just stood there awkwardly, shuffling from foot to foot, while Cousins just stared blankly into space. He was actually visualising being Thor's next meal.

After about five minutes Zenith looked up. He gave a sickly smile, clicked his fingers and spoke. This was in his normal voice at first, but with a volcanic undercurrent which was most likely to erupt at any moment.

"We have been tricked, gentlemen. Tricked again! With exactly thE SAME SPELL AS WHEN THEY RESCUED MILLER AND THAT TRAITOR! THE SAME SPELL – TWICE IN A WEEK!"

"But Professor! How?! The Benny-the-Many spell is just for a few people at most! Not a whole army!" exclaimed Lenny.

"You fool! Just because such a spell is usually used on no more than a few people, does not mean it cannot be used on ten-million!"

"Or billion!" said a smug David Hewitson.

"SHUT UP, BOY!" came the double retort.

Zenith's thoughts were racing, his fingers were held tightly to his lips. As the penny finally dropped he gave a wry smile.

"We've rumbled them, haven't we? And I see no reason why we should not take advantage of that fact. We go again – tonight, but this time with all wands blazing in case of any real WSS. Explain to the men that the billions of guards are just fakes and to ride right through them. Get to it!"

Bob Cousins and the two Hewitsons left to gather and instruct their evil comrades, but not before two shadowy figures who had crouched outside the window had suddenly dashed off towards their own caravan.

*

" . . . Ah, hello again, Tony, how's the fishing out there?" said Professor Winch to Tony Hughes, who had made an urgent call to the professor on the telemagickeraph. " . . . Again, eh? Still, it's what we expected . . . Yes, everything's ready or soon will be, you know Max, never a slacker. Thanks for that, Tony . . . Yes, and you. Bye for now."

Professor Winch was delighted to hear that his plan to let Zenith know he had been fooled by a ghost army was not needed after all, Zenith had worked it out for himself.

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"I've caught one!" yelled Tony.

"What?! One of Zenith's men?!" shouted Ben.

"No, a dogfish!" exclaimed an excited Tony, who for once had succeeded in his masquerade as a holiday-making fisherman.

*

Colonel Max Carton sat around a table in a barrack room, somewhere in the south of England.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for cancelling your arrangements this evening, but please be assured it is of the utmost urgency that I have brought you here tonight. This is it, gentlemen, the big one. You are the local WSS commanders for the twelve magic zones of the British Isles . . . but tonight,

you will have to do the unthinkable – you are going to let Zenith and his supporters through – without challenging them."

"What?!" exploded Squadron Leader William 'Wizzy' Wizzerman. "Dash it, man! Whatever for?!"

To many similar cries of astonishment and disagreement, Max Carton waved away the protests and politely gestured for them to keep quiet.

"Really!" humphed Squadron Leader Tom 'Toppo' Toppington. "No need to shout," as he soothed his aching eardrum.

"I quite agree with you there, Toppo," whispered Squadron Leader Colin Crapplington.

"Thank you – er – Colin," replied Toppo.

" . . . Once you have mustered your own battalions and squadrons, you will deploy your men judiciously among the – er – Bennys. Is that understood?"

To nods, although some reluctantly, Max continued.

"When it becomes clear that Zenith and his men are approaching, it is imperative that all squadrons adopt a defensive strategy only. Again, is this understood?"

There were more lacklustre nods.

" . . . When Zenith and his cohorts reach point zero, the commander of the zone that they have flown into will then inform me of this. Once they have fully passed our defences, I will then give the order to combine and pursue. Once again, is this understood?"

There were twelve very animated nods of full agreement to this last instruction.

"We will pursue them until they land, it is believed that this will be somewhere in Romania. We will then take cover and I will then weigh up what our next move should be. Now, any questions?"

Toppo raised his hand. "I'm sorry, sir, but I just don't get this at all. What on earth is going on?"

"Sorry, Toppo, that is the one question I am not at liberty to answer. Anyone else? No? Good! Get to it, gents, and best of luck to you all."

To muffled thanks from the predominantly formally attired officers with whisky and cigar ash stained DJs, the meeting broke up.

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Professor Winch, once more in ridiculous attire while masquerading as Ronaldo Blipp, whistled, swung his cane and walked cheerily along through a dark glade in the Hagelbarm Mountains. This was despite the fact that he knew full well he was very close to the warlocks' camp. The dark night was also rapidly closing in, but the stoic professor carried on whistling as he strutted along the path, getting ever nearer to Zezk and his lads.

Jajj, a warlock sharpshooter, espied what he thought could only be an enemy agent. He took aim with his battle-wand and fired a death-bolt straight at Ronaldo's heart. Upon hearing the tell-tale deadly whoosh!, Ronaldo turned his cane into a U-shaped hollow metallic pipe, which he lifted up and held straight out. The death-bolt slid up and around and came back

out of the hollowed out tube, and at even greater speed made its way back towards Jajj. Ronaldo waved his now straight again cane, and the death-bolt stopped dead and hovered directly in front of the stunned warlock, and even comically jabbed him on the nose a couple of times.

"Ah, greetings, friend, greetings! Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Ronaldo Blipp, Professor of Combined Magic and Sciences." He took off his silly top hat, and bowed.

This comic introduction was wasted on Jajj, who just stood there, terrified, staring at the hovering death-bolt. Ronaldo waved his cane once again and the death-bolt disappeared.

"What say you we go and meet Mr Kerantzky and talk a little treason, eh? And maybe a jug of your famous ale?"

"Keran-n-t-tz-zkee iz – 'e iz-z dead," said the shaking Jajj.

"In bed? Maybe a Ronaldo special tonic can help him. Where is the sleepy fellow?"

Before Jajj could even attempt an answer, Professor Winch's 'cane' was roughly torn from his grasp by two other warlocks who had come up from behind.

Zezk stepped out from behind a tree and strode over to Professor Blipp.

"Vy are you asking for Kerantzky? 'E iz dead, my nozy friend."

"Oh, I see," said Ronaldo. "I'll be on my way, then."

Zezk smiled upon hearing this, but then contorted his face in anger and gestured for his men to bring the stranger back to their camp.

*

Professor Zenith and TheLeague of Mordred took to the skies. The evil professor was aided by a flying sedan, supported by eight of his underlings. This was similar to what the warlocks had hastily put together when kidnapping Professor Pendragon but was far more sturdily built.

The Southern and Celtic Provinces numbered two-thousand as they flew over the Pennines and on towards Whitby on the east coast of England. This was their latest attempt of many at exiting the mainland, and Zenith was confident that this time they would be successful.

Squadron Leader Tom Toppo Toppington was given a signal by his lieutenant, and he gave instructions for his troops to back off from the advancing swarm of evil, leaving the ghostly army of Bennys to remain on guard. Toppo looked at the oncoming incoming.

Each and every one of the two-thousand League of Mordred had lifted their battle-wands and were firing death-bolts continually as they advanced. Toppo instructed his men to move even further back, but tragically even this was not sufficient and eighteen of his men fell to their deaths, down into the sea off the Whitby Coast.

"Steady men! Steady!" barked out Toppo.

The League of Mordred were upon them, firing their battle-wands continuously. Toppo lost twelve more men in this unceasing murderous barrage. Although mortified at his losses, the battle-hardened veteran just

about managed to obey the order not to challenge the enemy.

The effectiveness or otherwise of a Benny-the-Many spell on such a scale is precarious to say the least. If a person or persons believe it, there is a good chance of it being highly effective, if they do not, its fraudulence soon becomes obvious. Although The League of Mordred were reluctant to believe their evil master, they knew the punishment for cowardice or even hesitation. They did as they had been ordered and continued their barrage of death-bolts, despite being in mortal dread at what seemed to be overwhelming numbers against them, but their fears were soon eased.

Although the spell entailed the billions of Bennys firing their ghostly battle-wands, the supposed death-bolts simply went straight through The League of Mordred. They quickly realised that not only were they unharmed but that they were being hoaxed, and so continued their own onslaught.

As each of the Bennys were fired upon in return, they simply disappeared into thin air. This caused many of The League of Mordred to turn back and stare at this strange sight, but not for long. "Look ahead and keep firing! Do not disobey me again!" ordered Zenith. With the image of Thor in the forefront of their minds, no-one dared disobey, but this was soon to be of no consequence – they were through. The League of Mordred veered southeast and began their journey to Romania in earnest.

Colonel Max Carton, who had joined Toppo, watched as The League of Mordred were almost but not quite out of sight. This was going to be the optimum distance that they would follow, thus keeping the enemy within their sights and never letting them disappear beyond the horizon.

The combined forces of the entire twelve zones of the WSS looked to their commander for the order to go.

"Hold your nerve, men! This is it. Go! Go! Go!"

Although they knew they were not to catch up or even be seen, they still needed to reach the same speed as the enemy in order to keep them in their sights.

The airborne WSS troops were now in full pursuit of the enemy. They were less in number than The League of Mordred, but Max Carton knew that soon, very soon, it would be a case of the enemy of my enemy is my friend – or at least he hoped it would be.

If all went well, then the combined forces of the ironic allies would leave Professor Gemini Zenith facing far superior numbers in battle.

With the wind blowing through what was left of a once veritable mane of long blonde hair, Max Carton flew on. He shook his head, smiled, and said, "The sly old dog!"

57

Marriage on the Rocks

ALTHOUGH ONE was still in the air with his cohorts racing to Romania and the other was in his camp working out last minute details, both Zenith and Zezk received a telepathic communication – from someone with a tale to tell.

"That is very interesting, Agent H, yes, that certainly was worth my while. You shall be well rewarded," said Zenith.

"Ziss iz big newz. Ve vill ov courze 'ave to consider ze next move. Zank you, Mizter J."

*

It was Friday morning. Mike awoke, got washed and dressed and went to breakfast. His Krickenstaltz friends were already waiting for him, but there was also something which Mike could not quite get used to. On other tables in the dining room were quite a few people he would never normally associate with Krickenstaltz.

Apart from Josh Beecham, there was Jez Gildebrand, forced by the others to sit on the end because of his huge frame. There was Professor Cornstone, Estella Grant, and all four members of the Morse family. Big Bill was also there, propping up the opposite end of the table to Jez, again because of his titanic proportions. The usual Krickenstaltz incumbents were also all present of course, and there were two others who were not as far as Mike could tell, based at either of the citadels. These were Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne, aka the mysterious and perhaps even treacherous Anton Lieberman, and the strange, scruffy, little tubby fellow, Alexandru Galleron, commonly known as Alex. Although Mike would soon get to know both men a little better, at that moment he was not totally sure of either of them.

The hungry adult entourage all gave Mike a cheery good morning and resumed their small talk over their bacon and eggs. Most washed this down with a cup of black coffee – apart from Jez and Big Bill who had opted for beer, which was met with disapproving looks from most of the ladies.

"Hiya, Mike, what should we do today?" said a bright and breezy Vincent.

"Dunno. What do you reckon?" momentarily forgetting he was back at Krickenstaltz for a particular reason.

"Erm – listen, you two," said Juliette, "I've got some bad news. Father called me in and told me that many of the usually safe annexes have had to be declared out of bounds for—"

"For the duration?" interrupted Mike.

"You like that phrase, don't you? Well, yes, but he did say that as a consolation, the limits have been relaxed at this annexe. He said that as long as we avoid the locals we can have a look round Ayers Rock. What do you

reckon?"

"Brill!" yelled Vincent, which was about to earn him a strong rebuke from Professor Cornstone, but who then thought better of it. Whether this was to do with a seeming gradual improvement in his general attitude to people and life, or whether he realised he was outside of his jurisdiction, is anybody's guess.

Mike suddenly looked a little perplexed and did not offer his opinions on the mooted itinerary.

"Mike? Anything wrong?" asked a concerned Juliette.

"Yes, I suppose so – in a way. As much as I like being here, I've actually come back to do something for – er – your father. I'm not sure if I can just go swanning off here and there at the moment."

"I don't zink zat zer vill be a problem today, Mike," said Professor Ren Stannich, who had just walked in to see Mike over the very same thing. "Ve – er – are not qvite ready for ze – er – job, zo you go ahead and enjoy yourself."

As the professor walked away, Mike saw that he had a very worried look on his face. He decided not to draw attention to this and hoped that the other two had not noticed. Vincent certainly hadn't as he was wrestling with a particularly stringy piece of bacon, but Juliette seemed to be frowning, but Mike wasn't certain. Mike the Valiant was again wondering whether Professor Winch and the rest of the adults had been entirely straight with him over why he was back at Krickenstaltz – but such things would have to wait.

"Don't forget, you two, very light clothing and a hat, the bigger the better. OK? Meet you back here in an hour."

Juliette went off to get ready, leaving the two stragglers to struggle on with their breakfast.

Later, after donning T-shirts, shorts and cowboy hats, they were all ready for a day in the baking hot sun of the Northern Territories, a massive, parched, desert region of Australia.

They walked out on to the terrace of the dining room and down a rusty old staircase, and began their short walk over to Ayers Rock. This had seemingly been misnamed because it is really a small mountain with a height of around eleven-hundred feet. The three noticed that Ayers Rock and its immediate surrounds seemed to be the only thing of note for miles around, with nothing else but desert and scrubland stretching away as far as the eye could see.

The first thing that held their attention was the collection of smaller rocks, stones and boulders scattered right around its bigger brother. Upon many of these were ancient paintings, pictograms and writings, made over centuries by the Native Australian people. These told the events and beliefs of a people for whom time has stood still. The Aborigines, or to give them their due dignity, Native Australians – to this day still remain true to their history, their culture and their faith.

Mike, Juliette and Vincent stood there in the sweltering heat, their T-shirts soaked in sweat and their rather large cowboy hats doing nothing but

causing more sweat to build up on their heads, necks and faces, which they continually wiped on their sleeves as they commenced a walk around the outside edge of Ayers Rock. However, any ideas they had about walking right around it were soon scotched, as it became clear as they tramped along that it was far wider than they had initially believed it to be. It was actually six miles in circumference; not a great distance for a good walk in Romania or Britain, but not a sensible thing to try in the sweltering heat of the Northern Territories.

"What's all this about, then?" asked Vincent, who did not have a clue, but to his credit did not pretend that he did. The equally clueless Mike just shrugged his shoulders, just as a bead of sweat trickled right into his eye which made him squint. The more intelligent Juliette imparted what limited knowledge she possessed on the subject.

"The Rock itself is a natural monolith, a phenomenon, but the paintings and pictograms and things are a mixture of ancient art and sacred scriptures. I suppose some are both at the same time, and I don't suppose anyone really knows what they all mean. One thing I do know: the Native Australians still add to it even now. Look? You can make out fresh coats of paint on some of the smaller rocks, even on Uluru itself."

"Where?" asked Mike and Vincent at exactly the same time.

"Oh, sorry, that's what the natives have always called it, and it's not officially called Ayers Rock any more. We are in the Uluru National Park, which includes other strange rock formations and mystical cave paintings."

"Show off!" said Vincent, while Mike just smiled.

Although not that interested, both still duly obliged and looked around and noticed that some of the rocks, or in most cases large smooth stones or boulders, had indeed been painted or written upon quite recently.

The over-heated and irritable Vincent was bored to boot and was about to suggest going back home. But Mike, who had walked on a little further, suddenly shouted to the siblings.

"Here! There's a cave here! Maybe we can get into the centre."

They walked over to join him just as Mike disappeared from view.

"Mike!" shouted Juliette. "Don't be daft, you don't know what's in there!"

The only reply was a muffled shout for them to follow him in.

Vincent and Juliette squoze in through the narrow entrance and found themselves in a huge, dimly lit cave with the sun shining in through the gaps in the rock.

Mike had been careful not to wander off before the others had joined him, as it was not just one large hollow as he had expected but a collection of smaller caves and tunnels running off both sides of the main cavern, where one person could easily lose another.

"Wow!" said Vincent, who was glad things had suddenly taken an upturn as they normally do when a boy finds a secret cave in a mountain. The caves inside Ayers Rock were not and are not a secret, but try telling Vincent that.

"There's more of the same type of inscriptions and paintings in here on the

walls, and on some smaller rocks and stones along the bottom edge. Funny thing is, one of them has a picture of someone who looks just like me!" said Mike.

"Go on! Where?!" said Juliette.

"Right here – look. . . "

"Wow!" said Vincent.

Mike had pointed to what seemed to be the first in a series of pictures telling a story, spread over several painted stones.

"He might look like you, Mike, but it can't be. Look? There's a prince or a knight or something, and he's taking a sword off someone in a pond," said Vincent.

"I don't think the Lady of the Lake would take too kindly to you calling her home a pond, Vincent. This must have something to do with the story of King Arthur," said Juliette. She was just about to make a joke about Mike being a long lost relative of the celebrated monarch of the Dark Ages, when she noticed something else in the second picture. "And look at this, a windmill. This is all very odd."

Mike began to panic. He had never mentioned to any of his friends that he was indeed a scion of the House of Pendragon, and he had never in his wildest dreams thought that the connection would be recorded for all to see by ancient mystics, thirteen-thousand miles away from home. As regards a windmill being featured, Mike simply thought it must be something symbolic rather than factual. Professor Winch had not yet got round to expanding on tales of his lineage, and in particular the marriage of Arthur's niece to Michael the Miller of Denbrook.

"All hail King Mike, and cry for St – er – Wally!" yelled Vincent, whose Shakespeare was not up to much.

Mike noticed that in the picture with the windmill, a finely attired handsome nobleman sporting a well-trimmed blonde beard and wearing a crown, was presenting something to a poor countryman, or a peasant or a serf. Mike was not sure what the right word would be, but it certainly was all very odd. He had no doubt that the nobleman depicted was none other than King Arthur, but to Mike, even more cosmic was that the serf also had a very strong resemblance to himself, much stronger than the likeness he and his two friends had just seen in the pictures of the famed King.

Juliette was ecstatic at their find, but she did not realise that Mike was way beyond ecstasy and was somewhat in shock.

"This is fantastic, Mike! Maybe you really are related to King Arthur, and somehow the Aboriginal mystics have told the story . . . Mike? Mike?! Hang on!"

Mike, with his heart racing, had decided to let Juliette ramble on while he checked out the rest of the stones. Painted on the next stone were two smaller pictures, side by side. The image on the left was of a smiling king, shaking hands with a man dressed in a wizard's robes. "Merlin!" thought Mike. On the right was a picture of a cave, dark and damp. Inside the cave

was Merlin, discussing something with some rather dubious, dark robed characters. These held unsheathed swords in their right hands and bags of gold in their left. It was meant to depict treachery and Mike immediately picked up on its message.

The next picture along again featured Merlin. This time he was shown sitting in a small, dark room in a castle, with a book and a wand on a table. Mike knew what these were straightaway.

With Vincent and Juliette muttering between themselves as to what was wrong, Mike quickly moved on, taking in the images as fast as he could. Some were badly faded, and on others Mike could not draw any conclusions from what was being shown, but the meaning of the next picture was only too clear: it showed a young boy about fifty feet up in the air, clutching something round. "The penalty save!" thought Mike, but unfortunately this was out loud.

"Pardon?" said Juliette.

"Hmmm? Oh – er – nothing, my mistake. . . " replied the distracted Mike.

As he walked on he realised the pictures on the stones no longer featured lookalike mediaeval relatives, but now featured someone far more recent – himself! On the first of these, Mike the Now was depicted as being face to face with a dirty, greasy, long haired, bearded, leather and hide clad warrior. To Mike it could only mean one thing – a warlock.

The next picture was somewhat of a mystery. The smooth stone upon which it was painted was larger than the others, and was shaped like a bulkier version of a Dickensian milestone. The picture painted on it was of a large indistinct crowd gathered around what looked like freshly filled in graves. But whose? thought Mike. "And where am I?" he added in a whisper to himself.

Mike's mind then gave way to some rather disturbing thoughts: did his mystical doppelganger still feature in this scene – or not? If so, was he simply obscured from view by the large crowd – or was he actually. . .

Mike pulled himself back from such macabre musings and walked on yet again – only to be even more astounded.

"Mike? What's wrong? What have you seen?" said Juliette, who out of concern for her friend had rushed past the rest of the geo-pictorama to catch up.

Mike could only stare, dumbstruck, as both he and Juliette saw the final rock-painting of the saga of Pendragon. Juliette was equally shocked at the image – it was a wedding. The groom undoubtedly looked like Mike, and the bride was the spitting image of Juliette!

Mike was shocked and embarrassed, as was Juliette, who looked across at Mike and bit her lip. Mike could not even look back and instead just stared at the ground. Both were also glad that Vincent did not seem to have taken any particular interest in this final piece of mystical geo-art, but there was a very good reason for this.

At that moment, Vincent just happened to be rooted to the spot, terrified.

It was no wonder he had not shown any interest in any of the images of mystical matrimony, as something else had caught his attention, something which would very soon take our two potential honeymooners' minds off the wedding cake.

"If you two don't mind, I would greatly appreciate a bit of help here."

Mike and Juliette both looked across at Vincent. They saw that he was stood stock-still, staring unblinkingly at a snake which was slowly but surely advancing towards him. It was a highly poisonous death adder, native to Australia and southern and eastern climes in general. It was about two feet long, had a reddish brown body and a distinctive yellowy pink tail. It had long fangs which could inject a powerful neurotoxin into its victims, often causing paralysis, sometimes even death.

The snake slithered over the dusty red earth. It stopped, raised its head, stuck out its V shaped tongue, hissed, and slithered a little more. Vincent was not sure whether it would attack if he kept dead still, but in his state of shock he was not able to do anything else.

Juliette went to scream but just about managed to stop herself. She then instinctively reached down to the side-pocket of her shorts, Mike did the same; both then looked at each other in silent panic – neither had brought their wand.

The head of the snake was now on Vincent's sandal. Vincent, wide-eyed and terrified as it slowly moved up his leg, wondered why Mike or his sister had not done anything to save him, but in his terror he did not realise that Mike had gestured for Juliette to stay quiet and calm and do nothing. He had a plan. . .

The snake was now fully off the ground and almost beyond Vincent's knees. If Mike was to save the day by grabbing and then flinging the snake away from both of them, all in one fluid movement and all within a nanosecond, then that time was now. . .

Mike gently took a breath, closed his eyes for a second, opened them – and with lightning speed reached out and grabbed the tail of the snake while at the same time sinking to one knee. He remembered not to try and gain momentum which would have taken the snake nearer to Vincent's face, and instead used only the muscular power from his arms and legs to employ an outer motion only.

Within a split-second Mike had successfully dragged the snake off Vincent's leg and without pausing flung the snake as far as he could over to the other side of the hollow.

But Mike still wasn't finished. He picked up a small rock, shot off in hot pursuit, and killed the snake with one blow as it landed on the floor of the cave.

Although he gave a huge sigh of relief and although there were shouts of joy from the siblings, they were still not clear of danger. Mike had unwittingly flung the snake right back to where it had come from – a nest with hundreds of other very angry death adders, now disturbed from their slumber.

The angry snakes extricated themselves from each other and were looking for revenge, or at least they seemed to be to the three friends. The continual hissing was loud and angry, but Mike was not going to let his friends or himself suffer a second longer.

"Run!" shouted Mike. "Get out now!"

All three friends dashed back along the cave and were soon outside in the sunshine. They had reached safety but were nearly bent double, breathing heavily through a combination of fright and their exertions in the stiflingly hot cave and outside under the blazing sun, but they were all just happy to be breathing at all. This little episode had also taken Mike and Juliette's minds off what they had seen pictured on the stones.

"Are you all right, Vince?" asked Mike, after getting his breath back.

"Yeah, thanks, mate, I owe you one," said Vincent, whose tone of voice suggested Mike had done no more than maybe cover for him at school while he slipped out to queue for football tickets; but Mike didn't mind.

"Thank you, Mike, you really are a very brave young man!"

Mike received what had rapidly become his traditional kiss on the cheek from one of his ever growing band of admirers.

"Geroff, will ya, Vince!" yelled Mike.

While Vincent just laughed, Juliette did indeed kiss Mike on the cheek. In response, Mike gave his equally traditional blush but as usual was smiling with it. They were all safe and that was all that mattered.

Just like the two girls from Hemlock Hall often did with the three lads, Juliette pulled both boys towards her and linked them: Mike on her left and Vincent on her right. The three friends commenced the short but still weary walk back to what was going to be some very welcome air conditioning, rest, and of course, lunch.

As they approached the rusty staircase, a still worried looking Professor Ren Stannich was at the top, waiting for them.

"Er – ahem. Shud 'ave told you ziss before, but pleeze votch out for ze znakez at Ayez Rock, yez?"

All three looked at the professor in disbelief at such badly timed advice, but they did not have time to discuss it further.

"Now, children, pleeze come viz me to my ovizz, I 'ave zumzing to tell you."

The three youngsters all went to follow the professor, but what they had not realised was that he had literally meant his own children, not Mike.

"Oh, not you, Mike, I 'ave zumzing I need to tell zeez two. Pleeze go on to lunch, zey vill not be long."

Mike seated himself at his usual place in the dining room. It was still early so he was the only one in there. However, Ellen at last began to set the tables and put some bread out, which Mike picked up and started to eat. This was more out of boredom than hunger, and perhaps to give him something to do should others come in and see him sitting there on his own.

It wasn't too long before he was joined by Vincent and Juliette. Mike was curious as to what had been said but didn't think it right to ask about it, but he was soon to find out. Juliette was crying and Vincent was looking very downcast.

"What's up? What's happened?!" asked Mike.

"We've gotta go, Mike, today," said Vincent.

"What do you mean, go? Go where?!"

"Back to school," said Juliette in between sobs.

Although Mike was disappointed to hear this, he didn't think it cause for such upset.

"You knew you had to go back sometime, and you've already missed a fortnight. Besides, I thought you liked school?"

"I do, Mike, but you don't understand. We may never come back here again."

Juliette cried even more, so much so that Vincent went into one of his mega-rare brotherly concern modes and put his arm around his sister's shoulders.

"What?! Not come back! Why?!" spluttered Mike.

Vincent looked across at Mike. "Blinkin' 'eck, Mike! I thought you of all people would know why! The magic protecting Krickenstaltz has gone! People can see us, which means the enemy can see us as well. Because of this, Dad says we're to be evacuated for the – er – er—"

"Duration?" again suggested Mike, but not out of his usual mirthful love of the word.

"Yeah, that's it, but he said there's a good chance there won't ever be an Academy to come back to."

"Oh, I see," said Mike, careful not to show any signs of knowledge as to why this could be. "And you're definitely going today?"

"Yes, this afternoon," said Juliette, who had rallied a little.

"It doesn't sound too bad. And I believe that Jonesy fellow's not such a bad bloke," said Mike, winging it, as he really did not know any such thing.

"Oh, it's not Abracadrystwyth High, Mike. Father says we still can't go back there."

"Where, then?" asked a mystified Mike.

"Hemlock Hall, Mike, your old gaff," said Vincent.

"Hemlock Hall!" exclaimed a mightily relieved Mike. "That's fantastic!"

Juliette cheered up a little more.

"I know, Mike, I know. I'm dying to see the girls again, and Vince can't wait to get into some bother with Dutch and Leo, but I still love it here!"

Juliette's renewed cheerfulness just as rapidly vanished and she broke down again. Vincent just gently shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows as he held on tight to his sister.

Mike just sighed. He didn't know what to say or do and was glad when Ellen appeared with their lunches.

"You've heard, then?" asked Ellen of Mike.

"Yeah, just now."

"Will they be happy there, Mike, really?"

"Of course they will! It's a great place," insisted Mike.

"Fair point. Must be good then, eh, Jules?" said Ellen, who gently ruffled her friend's hair. "Come on, eat your meals, you both have to pack soon."

Juliette mustered all of her courage, looked around at her friends, and smiled. "I'm daft, aren't I?"

"You said it, Sis," heartily agreed Vincent.

Later that afternoon, Mike said goodbye to his two friends from Krickenstaltz, both of who were ready to transmute on the newly and fully authorised magic link between the two great bastions of civilisation. The irony of their leaving and Mike staying was not lost on either Mike or Juliette. It was a little like Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin during the Cold War when spies were being traded. The irony was totally and utterly lost on Vincent; he thought the word meant something to do with metal like objects.

Mike was asked by Professor Stannich to accompany him to his office. Here he was told of recent developments, and as far as anyone knew, the real reasons as to why he had been recalled to Krickenstaltz. What Mike did not know either, was that not even Professor Winch was sure any more, as King Arthur's sending of the book and wand into oblivion may have negated the need for a scion of Pendragon to reverse age old spells and to help set a seal around Krickenstaltz – or it may not have done. All that could be done was to ensure Mike was where he would be of best use, should the need arise.

"So nobody knows exactly what it is I'm supposed to do, or when, or anything?" asked Mike.

"No, Mike, nozzing. I am zorry about ziss, all ve know iz, you are ze one 'ope for all ov us."

"Oh," said Mike, rather understatedly. He thanked the professor and went off to his room.

After lying on his bed for quite a long time and musing on the current state of play, he got up, had a quick wash and went off to dinner. He was a little nervous at this, but he soon realised he was not alone or forgotten, as Josh had ensured there was a space on the table for him.

Upon sighting Mike, Josh deliberately stood and gestured to him that he had done so.

"So, Mike, all clued up now?" asked Josh.

"Yeah . . . or as much clued up as I'm going to be. I don't know why Professor Winch couldn't have just told me, though."

Josh was about to say something along the lines of "There isn't much to tell at the moment as he's not too sure himself," but sensibly pulled back from doing so. He opted for a more general response.

"He is just worried, Mike, about things in general and worried about you in particular. I suppose he can be overprotective at times, but then again he can be ruthless as we both well know. Still, you're here, there's nothing any of us can do about it, so let's just make the best of it," said Josh.

"Yes, lad, make the best of it," said Professor Cornstone, yet again ruffling Mike's hair. This was met with a stunned silence from most of the other diners.

Mike spent the rest of the evening just sitting talking with Josh, and was formally introduced to both Alex and Anthony. Later, a weary but highly amused Mike Miller smiled to himself as he climbed into bed. "Anton Lieberman, a blue-blooded English toff! Mind boggling!" Not long after, Mike was fast asleep.

Mike awoke early and went off for a walk around the grounds. As he neared the front entrance, he could have sworn that just leaving was his old postman, Danny Strefford – again – but it couldn't be – or could it? It may or may not have been Danny, but the man was certainly a postman and he had just delivered a solitary letter – for Mike. He was so used to checking the letter basket each time he passed the main door or on his way in or out, that he spotted the letter straightaway as he re-entered the hall. He hastily ripped it open and read it there and then.

'Dear Mike,

Just to let you know that Vince and I arrived safely. Dutch, Abigail, and Madeline were there to meet us, but Leo had gone to help in the kitchens. Apparently he does that every day, he's a good lad, isn't he? We were both a little nervous at first, but I think we're OK now.

You will be pleased to know that we are both in Camelot House. I'm staying in Fort William, Vincent has been given Stormont. He was really disappointed to find that there were no leopard skins on the floor. Mind you, so was I!

Now, Mike, I hope you don't mind, but I've got to ask you this. Did we see ourselves on one of the pictograms at Ayers Rock? If we did, then does this mean what will be? Or what might be? (Can you tell I've read 'A Christmas Carol'? You know, Gerry Hubcap, that mean old man?) Please let me know what you think, won't you?

Musn't keep you. Please write soon. Love, Juliette

PS. Everyone says hi'

Mike smiled and blushed – blushed and smiled – and then for good measure, blushed again – and smiled. He did not know what to think about the pictogram and was grateful that he had not been asked face to face. As for sending a written reply as requested by Juliette, he decided not to write back at all. If ever asked why, he would simply deny ever receiving Juliette's letter.

58

Double Trouble

ZEZK AND HIS MEN arrived back at their camp with Ronaldo Blipp in tow, literally. They had tied his hands and had then tied him to a horse and cart. Thankfully, the horse, a little like the old professor, perhaps, was old and stubborn and had just gently trotted along through the lower foothills of the Hagelbarm Mountains.

Since their expulsion from Bucharest many years before, the warlocks had lived in a succession of temporary camps. These were very basic but kept the now near-nomadic warlocks highly mobile.

Ronaldo Blipp was led into a clearing in the dense forest; here there were hastily built huts, all in a circle. These were nothing more than wattle and daub affairs and shabby at that, useless for enduring a full Romanian winter but would just about do as a temporary camp in autumn. At the centre was a large camp fire. This burned continually and was used as a source of heat for cooking, for making fire-torches, and also as a feeder fire for the blacksmiths and farriers. These had set up their tools of the trade alongside of the huts.

Zezk gestured for two of his men to follow him and to bring the professor into his own private accommodation. This was still wattle and daub, just bigger.

With the aid of two lengths of rope stretched out across the large but basic enclosed area over which some dirty sheets and rough pieces of cloth had been hung, the large single room had been converted into three separate smaller rooms, if of course they could be called that.

"Schtarckenzungel! Fereq!"

The two minions hastily retreated, leaving a still bound Ronaldo Blipp facing Zezk.

"Zo, my friend, vy are you spying on our camp? Eh?!"

"Ah, you must be Zezk. I've heard so much about you from Professor Zenith. He sends his greetings, by the way."

"I asked you a qveztun! Vot are you doing 'ere?!"

"My good man, there's no need to be so hostile, I am on your side. I am here to assist you in getting the information you need. I believe you have my old adversary here, that bumbler Pendragon. . . ?"

"And 'ow do you know ziss?!"

"My dear fellow, there is very little that goes on in this locale that I do not know about! I knew you were holding Pendragon less than an hour after you had kidnapped him. Now do you want my help or not?!"

The professor was bluffing as he had miscalculated things regarding the new warlock regime knowing of his alter ego, and more importantly his

supposed known allegiance to their cause.

Zezk frowned and scratched his greasy chin. He had not long finished a snack of roast raven.

"I vill check. If you are telling ze truze, you vill 'elp us, if you are lying, SSSSSCCHHKKKKKKK!" said Zezk, finishing off with a murderous trademark finger gesture across his throat, emulating his former leader. "VORGIJJJZZ-GENCHUG SCHNAZZAK. FEREQ!" he shouted.

The two guards re-entered and stood either side of Ronaldo Blipp, while Zezk went off to check on Blipp's credentials.

It didn't take long for Zezk to get the information he needed.

" . . . Ronaldo Blipp? Never heard of him! Kill him, then – I don't care."

Zenith did not like independent thought. He had not asked Blipp to present himself at the warlocks' camp and would much rather have had him by his side in battle. Blipp, like so many of his servants and helpers, was about to pay the price for not living up to his master's expectations. Zenith was certain that his sometime allies would cook up some particularly agonising demise for this rogue associate of The League of Mordred.

Ronaldo Blipp heard an angry shout, and in an instant he was being dragged out of the hut and over to the perimeter of the camp, right on the edge of the forest.

Although the guards had already taken his wand, Ronaldo Blipp was now thoroughly and very roughly searched to see if he had any other magic or even just dubious looking articles upon his person. The guard, Muzznak, who had been given this task plunged his hand into the professor's generous waistcoat pocket: he felt around, stopped, grinned, and yelled "Nishkazar!", which in British police vernacular roughly translates to – "Ello 'ello 'ello, what's all this 'ere, then?" He then pulled out two small bottles of a purple coloured liquid.

Having these bottles on his person was in itself a gamble, but the professor had hoped that it would simply be written off as a distilled berry-juice, favoured by the warlocks as a tasty drink for both themselves and their youngsters. The fact that it was also a potent spirit was considered by adult warlocks to be a bonus – an aid to child control.

The gamble ultimately centred on the conflict between availability and greed. Would the all year round plentiful supply of the juice-spirit, kept in hundreds of oak barrels and goatskin flasks in the camp stores, prevent the guards from simply being greedy right here and now? Ronaldo Blipp wanted them to be just that.

The guard gave the professor a suspicious look and opened one of the bottles. The liquid looked and smelled just the same as the juice he and most of his comrades favoured on hot days. He took a generous swig of one of the bottles and cautiously swilled the purple liquid around his mouth . . . it tasted the same, too. The suspicous frowns were then banished as he swallowed it down. Immediately, the second guard – Jajj, the one who had tried to fire a death-bolt at Ronaldo Blipp – snatched the second bottle and

he drained it in one gulp. This was followed by smiles of contentment accompanied by a very pleasant-sounding "Aaah" from both of the guards. The fact that neither had thought in advance, "What if it's a deadly poison?", was of no surprise to the cunning professor.

After ensuring that there really was no more, the guards grinned and threw the bottles into a nearby bush.

The professor could not help but notice his guards looking down at the ground; curiosity got the better of him and he idly followed suit. Just in front of the little group, down on the forest floor, was a mesh of twigs and branches tied together tightly by rope. It looked like the covering of an animal trap, dug out to capture and hold a boar, or perhaps a lion or other large cat or carnivore.

While one of the guards pulled the covering away, another untied Ronaldo Blipp's hands. The professor's relief did not last long. His hands were immediately retied behind his back and the rope was ran right around his middle and tied again, just to make sure. As soon as the guard had given one last tug to make sure the knot was nice and tight, he unceremoniously pushed Ronaldo Blipp down into the pit.

As the warlocks stood there laughing down at him, he heard a familiar voice.

"Gabriel!"

"Aloysius! Well well well! We're a fine pair, aren't we?!"

Professor Winch struggled to his feet, turned, and then surveyed his friend with sadness. He noticed that he too had his hands tied behind his back and presumably had been left this way since his capture. But before either could say anything further, the reunion of the two old friends was rudely interrupted by Zezk.

"You zink you can fool me?! Zenith 'az never 'eard ov you! Now – boze ov you vill 'elp us find Krickenstaltz, and zen, maybe zen – ve vill let you live – yez?" lied Zezk.

A rope ladder was then lowered down one side of the pit and a guard climbed down. He immediately forced each man to turn away from the other so they were back to back. With fists clenched and with as much force as his sadistic being could muster, he hit each one as hard as he could on the head, forcing them down into a sitting position.

The two elderly professors now found themselves in a very cramped situation indeed, with their aching heads which they maddeningly couldn't rub or massage simply adding insult to injury.

The guard climbed back up, the ladder was withdrawn and the pit was again covered over, leaving the two prisoners in pitch darkness.

Aloysius spoke in a regretful tone to his old friend.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel, I should have been more careful when travelling to see Vlad. It looks like I've messed things up good and proper. I'm so exhausted that even my psychic powers are up the spout, but you probably guessed that?"

Professor Winch wanly smiled before replying.

"After the thirty-ninth, no, I tell a lie, fortieth attempt at contacting you, I gathered as much. At least, I didn't think it the case that you were just too busy regaling our rustic friends here with a complete unexpurgated rendition of Eskimo Nell! (Professor Pendragon chuckled upon hearing this). But do not worry, old friend, do not worry . . . now – to bring you up to date. . . "

Professor Pendragon listened patiently while Professor Winch explained recent events and developments which had occurred or had come about since they had last spoken to each other.

Hours passed by. Professor Pendragon and Professor Winch, both duly stripped of all magic accoutrements as far as their captors could tell, were still sitting against the cold, muddy sides of their makeshift prison cell. Their hands were still tied, both were tired and hungry, and their heads still ached and throbbed.

Frantic shouts and loud noises suddenly boomed right around the camp. As these became increasingly louder and more urgent by the second, the two friends realised that something big was about to happen.

What they could not be sure about was whether the noise and general chaos meant that the warlocks were about to take part in dread battle, or if the march on Krickenstaltz had finally begun.

But none of this altered the fact that the time to make an escape bid was right now.

Firstly, the two back to back elderly wizards made concerted efforts to turn right around in the tiny space. This was in the hope that they would finally be able to sit facing each other, but it soon became obvious that this was not going to be possible. What they needed to do would, instead, have to be done more by touch and intuition and perhaps some verbal guidance, without either man being able to see the other.

Finally, after an energy-sapping, arm-straining effort, Professor Winch managed to force his hands around to his side, while at the same time forcing his legs and feet up as far as he could. He knew he didn't have long; he knew if he did not complete his task quickly he may well end up breaking a bone or two. With great determination and a lot of pain, he reached under his left shoe, slid back a compartment and just about managed to take out two more bottles of the purple liquid, straining to hold on to them by using what strength he had in his fingers. As with the procurement of the towers from the old Wembley Stadium, Professor Winch had no qualms whatsoever about using non-magical gizmos and tricks – the secret shoe compartment was something he had seen in a James Bond film, and even in a TV advert for boys' shoes.

With an equally painful effort, both professors then clenched their teeth and twisted and contorted their arms, almost dislocating their shoulders in the process.

With the ropes around their middles straining and tightening, it needed a combination of willpower, brute force and more than a touch of sheer dumb

luck for their hands to meet briefly in the space between them. Fortunately, this was just enough for Professor Pendragon to quickly but cautiously take one of the bottles from his friend.

After further painful manoeuvrings from both men, between the two of them they eventually managed to achieve their first objective which was to open the bottles.

But if what they had achieved so far was difficult, this was nothing to what they had to do next.

After taking a deep breath so as to relax his body as much as possible, Professor Winch bent backwards as far as he could and forced his head right back and as far down as he was able. It was far from ideal but it would have to do.

With another tremendous effort, Professor Pendragon lifted his bound hands still holding the bottle and rather comically poured as much of the contents as he could over his friend's face. The ensuing splutters let Professor Pendragon know that his aim had been true.

Professor Winch pulled faces which would surely have deserved a place on the podium in any gurning competition. This was to try and control the streaming of the liquid so as to make sure that he could ingest even one tiny drop, even to inhale its pearl drop like fumes would suffice. But such drastic last-chances were not needed.

With the aid of his tongue which he stuck in and out like a deranged cobra, he finally managed to swallow a few drops of the berry-juice.

After a brief rest for both of them, they managed to complete the same drip-feeding process in reverse.

Eventually, both men had taken in enough of the juice from the other's bottle for the spell to be finally activated. Exhausted, they both gave huge groans and slumped forward.

This final part of the magic process had ensured that both professors would take on the mantle of two particular warlocks, and of course, vice versa. The two guards in question had indeed been affected by the potion in the guise of a soft drink.

Now they had to wait. . .

Then. . .

"Schnaka schnaka lek vikostovolk, undenz Gregargenjazzaschcaz! Gregargenjazzaschazz Leebereetzenz!" yelled Professor Winch.

"Vaxen Scnickyfavenjejjgluzzer! Oh – er – Fereq! Fereq!" added Professor Pendragon.

In response came frantic yells from around the camp. These were from the warlock guards on the twilight shift reacting to the disturbing news that the prisoners had escaped, and could someone please let Jajj and Muzznak out. The cover was quickly lifted and the two were hauled out and their bonds untied by their unwitting comrades.

Professor Winch looked around and saw two familiar figures standing on guard by the camp fire. He pointed directly at them and resumed raising the

alarm in a Slavo-Germanic tongue.

"Convaarkenshnuzz! Convaarkenshnuzz! Outenz! Outenz! Er – kereq!"

The two guards looked terrified as they saw the remainder of their comrades advancing on them with faces like fury. They both rapidly came to the conclusion that it would be unwise to hang around to find out why this was, and so duly fled into the night. Their comrades were quickly in pursuit.

In the confusion, Professor Winch and Professor Pendragon were able to sneak away.

"Who'd have thought it?! An Emergency Sprunchfetter spell!" enthused Aloysius.

"I did!" crowed Professor Winch, as they snuck away deep into the hills of the Hagelbarm Mountains.

What Professor Winch had never told any of his colleagues was that he had continued to work on Magic-Fusion spells. Some years back he had managed to perfect a short-term but highly effective and equally highly mobile version of the spunchfetter spell. This variation on a theme only needed a few tiny drops of sprunchfetter sap. The instigator, as always, has full knowledge, as does any person willing to undergo the process. But sadly for Professor Winch, he had not found any civil or friendly use for such highly advanced magic, and rather ironically, just like his old friend Charlie, perhaps, had realised its usefulness in military operations, particularly of the espionage variety. This meant there had to be a target, someone who would unwittingly take in the sap in whatever form it has been administered – which can be liquid, solid, vaporous or even gaseous. Although in friendly situations it just didn't matter who was the first to take the plunge, Professor Winch knew that when involving the enemy in such a process, it was better that they swallowed, drank or inhaled their doses first. This then allowed the instigators total control over the spell's activation, the timescales and the timings involved, and full knowledge of its effectiveness.

And as we now know, it was this very spell which had been the root cause of such current comic mayhem. Although a gamble, it often is with the somewhat cavalier professor, the excellent forward planner had guessed correctly that the two guards would confiscate and drink the berry-juice and sprunchfetter sap infusions. However, gambler or not, Professor Winch had still had earlier worries that either one or both of the warlocks who had been given the job of frisking him, could easily have drank from both of the bottles rather than just the one. The spell would still have worked of course, but the end result may well have been the instant creation of two brand new warlocks – Jazak and Muznajj, and maybe even two new recruits for the WFW – Gabysious and Aloriel. But after a little musing, the professor had simply shrugged his shoulders and muttered "Meh". As for the possibilty of the juice not being drunk at all, this was something Professor Winch had forced himself not to dwell on. Thankfully, the 'Meh' had turned out to be redundant. Lady luck had seen both men through yet again.

As they stole away into the night, they could hear angry shouts from Zezk

threatening blood-curdling revenge, not only on our two escapees but also on his minions who had fallen for the deception.

While the chase was still very much on, the effects of the spell began to wear off and both the two warlocks and the two wizards reverted to their original selves. Despite this, the latter knew that they were not safe until they had reached Krickenstaltz.

They stayed low, making slow and quiet progress through the thick foliage of the dense forest. They made sure that they kept distance between themselves and the angry voices of their pursuers. Both men were tiring, but were relieved when the voices eventually became more and more distant and then died away altogether. Professor Winch knew that they still had a long journey ahead of them before they reached the magic citadel, but as ever, he had an idea. He furrowed his brow and put his hands to his ears to block out any distractions.

"Vlad, it's Professor Winch – can you hear me?"

"Yes, Professor, Vlad here, this is a surprise."

"Vlad, I'm with Aloysius. We escaped but we can't last much longer out here without help. Can you send someone to pick us up?"

"Gladly, Gabriel, and well done. Please stay where you are but keep talking. We'll home in on your exact location."

Both men slumped to the ground, exhausted, and waited for their lift. They kept up the small talk to ensure that the impalas could find them, and it wasn't very long before they heard the tell-tale thudding vibrations of impalas on the move. On this occasion, Vlad decided that he should tag alongside one of his trusty lieutenants to help bring his eminent guests to safety.

"Hello, Vlad, this is an honour," said Professor Winch, as the two impalas came into view.

Vlad looked at the generous girth of both men, considerably more since their last meeting. He shook his head and snorted, "Not for me, I can assure you!"

"Yes, you are quite right, too many sweets unfortunately. Isn't that right, Gabriel?" said Aloysius.

"Speak for yourself!" said a supposedly indignant Professor Winch, holding his wobbly middle in and nearly fainting with the effort.

Both impalas lowered themselves to ground level. Aloysius Pendragon climbed up on Majesta while Professor Winch hitched a lift on Vlad, who theatrically swayed and buckled his legs, pretending it was a case of the professor that broke the impala's back.

"Ha ha, very funny, Vlad. Now let's get serious. . . "

Vlad was soon brought up to date on recent events. In return, Vlad told Professor Winch that his entire herd had made it safely to the land surrounding Krickenstaltz. Although Vlad did not complain, Professor Winch knew that the surrounds were not really suitable for a herd of impala, whose natural habitat was more wide open plains than hedged-off cultivated fields

or rough commons, but Vlad and his herd were willing to make sacrifices.

Vlad and his subordinate sensed that both their guests were tired and so continued the journey in silence.

As weary as Professor Winch was, his mind was now on how his good friend Max Carton and his airborne forces had fared. . .

59

The Enemy of my Enemy

"LISTEN UP, MEN!" shouted Colonel Carton. "It looks like they are making their descent. Keep an even pace as we must keep them in sight."

Colonel Max Carton had successfully kept his pursuing force within sight of the enemy, but without being seen by them.

Zenith and his combined Celtic and Southern Provinces were over the Hagelbarm Mountains. Zenith strained his eyes and scanned the canopy of the dense forest below, looking for the pre-arranged signal.

"There it is men! Three single red flashes. Aim for the clearing directly below, but do not land!"

Upon noticing a more rapid descent by The League of Mordred, Max Carton ordered his own forces to speed up. This was despite the increased risk of being spotted, but he knew that there was an even greater risk of losing sight of the enemy altogether if they did not. The colonel had decided to strike early, as he was quite certain that the warlocks would do the same thing. He was wrong – so very, very wrong. . .

The pursuers reached the point where they had seen the enemy descend and were given the order to hover at about fifty feet. After quickly scanning the area, Colonel Carton gave a gasp of disbelief. The League of Mordred had vanished.

The colonel thought for a moment, then barked out an order for six of the men nearest to him to join him and carefully descend a little lower while at the same time spreading out.

The colonel and his impromptu troop made a cursory check of the immediate area, slowly and silently hovering over the trees. Toppo directed three of the men to land and to make a rapid round-robin search of the undergrowth on both sides of the clearing. Evil wizards or not, they had to be somewhere.

The search drew a blank, and yet the colonel was too seasoned a campaigner to be lulled into a false sense of security. His brow was furrowed and sweat trickled over his temples. He sensed that they had flown into a well-laid trap. A slight movement in the trees immediately to his right which the troop had only just checked, and which he had sensed more than seen or heard, was enough to confirm his suspicions.

"Do not land, men! DO NOT LAND! AAaaarrrrrgggh!"

Colonel Max Carton clutched his chest, slid off his broomstick – and fell to the ground, dead.

The WSS were surrounded by the enemy – both enemies. The League had been instructed by Zenith to form a semi-circle; this connected with the

entire Warlock army led by Zezk. These were also in a semi-circle but some were airborne while the remainder were on foot. There were no warlock troops on horseback today due to the constrained nature of the battle zone.

Professor Winch's plan had failed – the WSS were totally surrounded.

Both Zenith and Zezk had been told by an informer that they were being played off against each other and that the WSS were in pursuit. Neither Zenith nor Zezk could admit to each other that they had planned to wipe out the other's forces, and so they had continued their shaky alliance to turn the tables on the WSS, who now had no chance to put their own plan into operation.

The WSS were being fired on repeatedly from up above and from all sides and were facing a force considerably larger than their own. This malodious super-army continued to fire volley after volley of death-bolts into a rapidly decreasing WSS force, although to achieve this brutal and constant bombardment from the air and all around, Zezk had had to bow to the will of Zenith and abandon his and his warriors' traditional battle tactics.

There had been neither time nor the space anyway to organise and indulge in such an infamous brand of warfare. Over the centuries, the warlocks had achieved such infamy through being more ingenious and unmercifully cruel and barbaric on the battlefield than most of their enemies would ever dream of being. They had long known the value of diversity in battle, supplementing magic with ancient and equally deadly forms of warfare and weaponry. The main difference between the likes of the more intelligent Zenith and the near-neanderthal Zezk, was that the former simply wanted a swift victory, the latter preferred to inflict a slow and painful crushing defeat on the enemy.

Despite the warlocks also employing an array of magic weaponry which any army from any magic kingdom would be familiar with, this was always reserved, if possible, for airborne assaults. This was because most warlock chiefs set great store by their own horsemen and foot soldiers, who fought not with wands and spells and incantations, but with axes, bludgeons, flails and more.

In a full-scale battle, the opening gambit was for the warlocks in the air to shock and stun and soften up the enemy by firing off their entire range of death-bolts and death-slices and so on. Then it was time for the ground troops.

Warlock horsemen followed by several legions of foot soldiers would storm across the battlefield, replete with their brutal accoutrements, and steam right into the enemy: lunging and thrusting, bashing and crushing, throwing, swinging and stabbing with demonic fury, until all opposing forces had been totally wiped out.

Some of the warlock warriors would spend hours, sometimes even days, sharpening up an axe or a sword. Many others would leave their flails and scythes out in the rain so they would be as rusty and blunt as possible before use in battle. Such was the warlocks penchant for diversity in warfare – neat

and sharp fatal cuts, or human flesh roughly ripped and torn. It was all in their gruesome armoury.

Sometimes the airborne warriors with battle-wands would work together with their comrades on the ground: they would find a target, aim, and release their most evil weapon – the dreaded trepannerblast. This did not kill but instilled total terror and madness into the enemy in an instant. Any unfortunate foe caught by one of these would either fall from their broomstick to their death, or if they survived the plunge or if it was a foot solder on the receiving end, they would run off screaming with their hands to their ears, totally oblivious to their surroundings. The fear-driven deranged victim would then be cruelly cut down, perhaps by a rampaging, axe-wielding warlock on horseback, or maybe by a foot soldier with his own gruesome death-bringer, perhaps a broadsword or even a pike.

Such unfortunates would end up lying in a huge pool of their own blood from huge gashes in their chest, stomach or back, and were usually decapitated.

But today the entire warlock army, whether in the air or on the ground, just begrudgingly joined in with their supposed allies firing salvo after salvo at the heavily outnumbered WSS.

Despite facing such overwhelming numbers and superior firepower, the WSS fought bravely on.

Although ultimately futile, in order to at least momentarily escape being totally surrounded in the air, Acting-Commander Colonel Toppington felt that he had had no option but to land and fight a ground battle.

Toppo knew they were in a hopeless position, but the brave veteran did his best to rally his men.

"What we do now, men, may well help those who follow. NOW FIGHT! FOR ARTHUR! FOR HONOUR! FOR ALL WHOM WE HOLD DEAR!"

With grim faces the much depleted WSS force took up Toppo's rallying cry. In terms of honour and dignity, it meant everything – in less lofty terms, right here and now, it meant nothing.

It didn't take long for the battle to become even more ugly, if that was possible.

Whether it was bravery, stupidity, loss of discipline or just sheer desperation, was hard to say, but some of the WSS tried to take the fight to the enemy by breaking ranks, storming into their lines and fighting hand-to-hand with the first warlock or League member (or both), that stood in their way. Despite the occasional enemy warrior falling to the ground dead due to being taken by surprise, this was nothing compared to the losses still being incurred by the WSS, including their latent storm troopers. It was hopeless.

Toppo knew it would not be long now. He closed his eyes and whispered,

'Goodbye, Fleur, I love you, I always have and always will. Perhaps you should have listened to your father after all. . .' He opened his eyes and immediately barked out orders for his remaining troops to form a circle and for one man in two to fire their battle-wands upwards, and for the others to

fire straight ahead. Again, the enemy were taken by surprise, and for a fleeting moment the WSS thought they could still save the day, but it was not to be. Once both enemy armies had adjusted to the new tactics from the WSS, the butchery recommenced.

Toppo was now dead, as were most of the brave men who had held true to their hearts and to the bitter end all that was good and holy. From an original force of fifteen-hundred men, only eight of the WSS were still alive, led by one Corporal McKevitt.

The corporal knew they were beaten and yelled out an order to one of his seven remaining soldiers, Private Robinson.

"Robinson! We've had it. Go and find Krickenstaltz and tell whoever is in charge that we've failed. Get to it!"

"But Corp! What about you and the others?! I can't just leave you!"

"You can and you will! That's an order, soldier! Move i—"

The whole of the WSS force bar Private Robinson, was dead.

Robinson was fortunately not seen by the enemy as he slanked away into the undergrowth. If he was to survive it was to be by stealth. He stayed where he was, hidden among the schmurple bushes until it was safe to make a break.

The order came from both Zenith and Zezk to cease firing. This was not instantly obeyed, but the wand-fire gradually faded away as the men still firing realised some of their comrades further down the lines had stopped.

Once it had become clear that they had routed the WSS, the malodious warriors yelped, cheered and sang. The English clapped.

Zenith and Zezk went off to boast of their victory, leaving a nominal force behind to clear up the carnage. This was not a matter of honour, even the limited honour of attending to their own dead. It was purely to ensure that the area was suitable for future use. The bodies, both friend and enemy were simply slung into the undergrowth. Grateful rodents and other assorted carnivores large and small, thought Christmas had come early.

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Like Professor Winch and Professor Pendragon before him, Robinson commenced the tiring journey to Krickenstaltz. Hours went by and he was cold, tired and hungry, but making things worse was the fact that he did not have a clue as to where he was going, not even the general direction. He had initially regretted not salvaging a broomstick from the battle zone, at least then he would have had the benefit of speed and a clear aerial view. Robinson was never to know it, but he had eventually come to the same conclusion as Professor Winch had come to some time earlier: "If I can see the enemy. . ."

The exhausted private continued to stumble along barely navigable tracks and trails. After forcing his way through a particularly dense clump of gorse-bushes which had blocked the way, he found that the path of sorts not only straightened but widened considerably. Hoping against hope that he would finally see signs of civilisation, he looked straight along the path, but what he

saw was not the desired sight of locals working in the forest, or maidens carrying baskets of food and drink. In fact, the sight was so bizarre that he rapidly came to the conclusion that a fatal combination of post-battle stress, exhaustion, hunger and thirst had finally addled his brain. He rubbed his eyes, thinking, hoping even, that this bizarre sight would disappear. It didn't. Very definitely coming towards him were – two eccentric old English wizards being given a lift by two impalas. . .

"Hello there! Don't I know you?!" shouted Professor Winch.

Robinson went up to the strange convoy, looked up, and gave a sign of recognition.

"Winchy! Er – Professor Winch, sir! Am I glad to see you!"

"And why would that be, young Robinson?" asked Professor Winch.

Although Jack smiled due to being impressed that one of the top brass had remembered his name, his face just as quickly fell.

"I have some truly dreadful news for you, Professor. We were pursuing the enemy, when all of a sudden. . . "

A few moments later the faces on the two old men were ashen. Aloysius kept shaking his head, but just couldn't bring himself to say anything.

"This is unbelievable. And it's all my fault!" despaired Professor Winch. The others could not see it, but tears rolled down his cheeks. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. This is absolutely dreadful. I've sent fifteen-hundred men to their deaths, and for what?!"

Vlad and Majesta were also horrified to hear of such a terrible defeat for their allies, but Vlad felt it best to say nothing, but he did stop and lower himself to the ground as a gesture for the weary soldier to climb up.

"Beggin' your pardon, Professor Winch, sir, but every single man in the service knows the risks, and if you 'ad 'ave told 'em all that they would die tonight at the enemy's hands, they would still 'ave gone into battle. You must not blame yourself, sir, you musn't," said the stoically loyal Private Robinson.

"Thank you, Robinson, you are very kind. By the way, what is your first name, young fellow?"

"Jack, sir."

"Very droll. What is your real name?"

"Jack, sir."

"Oh," said Professor Winch.

The journey resumed, and again there was silence until they had reached Krickenstaltz.

*

In one makeshift room in a wattle and daub hut were two men and four faces. Zezk and Zenith looked at each other, smiling superficially but each with a seething hatred in his heart for the other.

"Zo, 'ave you got ze book?"

"Ah, I'm sorry, Zezk, but like your wand I'm afraid the enemy has seen to that. But what about Pendragon? Has he cracked yet?"

"Zer iz also problemz viz 'im and zat Blipp fellow 'oo voz 'ere."

"Problems? What problems?"

"Zey 'ave boze escaped."

"Escaped! How on earth did they manage that?!"

"Zey – er – used zat, er – lookalikenz spell. Zey made zemselves look like two ov my guardz and zey escaped in ze confuzen."

"Not again! You mean zey – er – they used a Benny-the-Many spell?! Didn't you have them tied up?!"

"Benny ze 'oo?"

"Come to think of it, it could have been that damned sprunchfetter caper. Never mind, I don't suppose it matters how they did it, but you, you bungler, you should have had them secured! Or killed! That way they wouldn't have been able to perform a Paul Daniels card trick, never mind escaping!"

Although Zenith was tempted to vent his full fury on his pretend ally, he was not stupid. Recent events in Thornton were still fresh in his mind. At the first sight of a blue needle mist, he risked his entire army being wiped out by the even more bloodthirsty warlocks. He decided to continue to play along, which is exactly what Zezk decided.

Zenith went out to direct his own men into a different clearing, slightly away from the warlocks' camp. He couldn't risk civil war before they had even tried to find Krickenstaltz. The two talked tactics, while at the same time each tried to formulate an unspoken secret plan to dispose of the other, once Krickenstaltz had been secured.

*

While Mike and most of the other incumbents were fast asleep, a guard on a parapet spotted two impalas carrying three men between them. Professor Winch and his friends had arrived at Krickenstaltz.

*

And what about the mysterious spy who had tipped the wink to both Zenith and Zezk and was expecting a handsome reward from both?

The spy and traitor in question was sitting in his ramshackle, badly maintained home, somewhere in the Cardigan Bay area of Wales. He finished off a large whisky and picked up a Magic Real Estate Catalogue. He had been trying to choose between a Malibu beach house and a Bavarian castle.

The resourceful thief as well as spy used the telemagickeraph he had recently liberated from the office of Principal Forgetful Jones.

"Hello, Magic Mansions Ltd? . . . I called earlier . . . Yes, that's right . . . Yes, I've made my mind up. I'll have a Bavarian castle, please . . . The money? . . . Oh, I can assure you there are absolutely no worries there . . . Where? What do you mean, where? Bavaria, of course . . . Today? . . . Great! Thank you . . . My name? . . . Oh sorry, didn't I tell you before? . . . It's Hector Jibb. . . "

Jibb put the telemagickeraph away. He sat back down and smugly smiled to himself as he downed his nineteenth neat whisky of the evening.

"Sack me for incompetence would they? Call me a drunk?! Ha! Who would

suspect someone already cleared of being an enemy spy?! Stick that in your pipe and smoke it!"

The also stupid Hector Jibb sobered up rather quickly, as four WFW agents banged his door down – and arrested him.

60

Enemies at the Door

THE AREA immediately surrounding Krickenstaltz looked less of a magic citadel and more like a zoo or safari park. The half mile or so of open scrubland which surrounded the Academy separating it from the dense forest, had thousands of grazing impalas unhappily chewing the unsuitable and sparse vegetation.

Punctuating their number were fifty or so tents belonging to battalions of the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment. Their duties were to keep watch on the domain, assisted by the impalas.

Out of fairness to Vlad and his herd, the cavalrymen who had made their camp among the impalas, had left their horses in the stables to the side of the Academy. The main reason for this was not the lack of space, although this was also true, but because the horses were not magic beasts, and therefore could not be reasoned with if they reacted badly out of quite natural territorial instincts.

It was a source of amusement to both antelopean and human allies that an agreement had been made that should the need arise, the horse-less cavalrymen could substitute their usual trusty steeds with the impalas.

As a further precaution, hastened by insistent, predominantly Australian backpackers, but far more to do with strengthening defences against a two-fold enemy, a huge steel fence had been erected right around the edge of the open land.

Up on top of the Academy were the usual parapets, ramparts and battlements that were ubiquital when it came to any European castle or chateau.

The other half of the Cavalry Regiment had been posted within the Academy, and from these came the roof-top guards.

For three days the guards had manned the parapets looking out for an advancing enemy or anything unusual. So far – apart from two friendly old wizards and a soldier atop two impalas – they had not spotted anything untoward.

Their number was suddenly swelled by one – Private Jack Robinson, usually of the WSS. As he was devoid of an active unit to return to he had immediately volunteered to join the Cavalry Regiment. The top brass would not hear of it and were going to send him home for some well-deserved leave.

The protests from Jack had been so relentless that just to keep the peace, Professor Winch and Ren Stannich had overruled all other commanders and had added him to the guard duty rosta.

The keen eye of Jack Robinson was soon to come to the attention of the WFW top brass.

Jack was on guard duty on the upper ramparts. His shift, which had passed so far without incident, was coming to an end. He gave what he thought would be his last look over the parapet. He put his hand to his forehead, screwed up his eyes, and looked out and over towards the forest, the edge of which was about two-hundred yards away. Jack was about to turn away and go off and see where his relief was skulking, when he saw something out of the corner of his eye – a flash of light. It could have been a signal of some sort, or maybe just a ray of sunlight shining through a gap in the trees; but, Jack thought, it could just as easily have been the glare of a sword, or a buckle, or any part of a soldier's accoutrements, whether horseman or foot soldier.

Jack looked again. Just for a second he thought he could see a lone rider, high up on a hill – he was right, it was. The rider was descending and was soon level with the dense forest at the edge of the Academy. He was soon out of sight again, but it was enough for Jack Robinson to raise the alarm.

Jack picked up the hollowed tusk of a dead rogue wolf-whale, liberated from the cannibal-elves by Professor Cornstone many years earlier. He held the horn to his mouth and took a deep breath – and then coughed, spluttered and clutched his throat. He sank to his knees, gasping, as his face began to turn a very deep shade of purple.

Gregor Ojstott, who was about to change places with Jack, saw his writhing body, rushed over and expertly performed the Heimlich Manoeuvre.

A few minutes later, a very relieved Jack was sitting up, rubbing his sore stomach with one hand and his equally sore throat with the other. On the floor beside him were the regurgitated remains of dried seaweed. He had ingested this upon taking a breath prior to supposedly sounding the alarm, which had still not been sounded at all.

"Er – Jack, sorry about this, but the real alarm horn is here, tied to the wall, didn't you see it?"

"No, sorry, I didn't, but what's this flamin' great thing left here for, then? And why hasn't it been cleaned?! I coulda died!"

"It's just a regimental trophy. It was shifted up here when the top brass wanted the place clearing up. I dunno why that stuff wasn't cleaned. I suppose as it wasn't meant to be used, nobody thought it needed it, but why do you want to raise the alarm?"

"I saw someone ridin' towards 'ere, but then 'e was gone. It could've been an enemy scout so I thought I'd better warn everyone."

"Did you see what he looked like?"

"Not really, but I saw his horse, though: a great big white charger. . . "

Gregor did not wait to hear any more. He picked up the more usual alarm horn and gave three long and loud blasts. He passed the horn to Jack and ran back inside.

The battlements were soon overflowing with additional guards.

Along came one Colonel McCann with Corporal Gregor Ojstott in tow.

The colonel hoped against hope that the NCO and the private were justified in rousing the entire establishment. He still had painful memories of something similar happening years before.

One Josh Beecham had called the whole camp to arms, all for the sake of a troop of Young Venture Wizards. The young scouts had done nothing more than send a pall of smoke up above the canopy of the nearby forest, due to burning the trout they were going to have for lunch.

"Now then, young fella m'lad! What's all this about a warlock scout?" said the colonel, breezing up to Jack Robinson.

"If that's 'oo 'e was, I didn' see that much of 'im. All I saw was someone on a whackin' great white 'orse appear for a second, then he was gone," said Jack, rather informally in the company of a colonel, thought Gregor, but the officer made no objection.

Colonel McCann turned to Gregor. He was not a happy man.

"A white horse? Not, perhaps – a jet black horse with a white coat on?"

"Well. . ." came the hesitant reply.

An uncertain Gregor looked at the colonel, then turned and gave Jack a nervous glance. The occasionally over-trusting young corporal had simply reacted to Jack's seeming certainty, but now he came to think of it, what was so significant about a rider on a white horse? He was soon to find out. . .

"I ain't blind, colonel, sir, it was a white 'orse, as sure as eggs is eggs," replied a nonchalant Jack, who did not know where this was going, but the blushing and flustered Gregor now had some idea. . .

The colonel, boiling up inside and with his neck and face going from red to purple, ignored Jack's continuing lack of formality, but he could not ignore a certain fact.

"Corporal Ojstott (Gregor gulped. To date he had always been Ojjy, even to all senior officers), and you, whatever your name is . . . I'm sorry to have to correct you two – gentlemen, but I've yet to hear of a warlock, whether a scout, a foot soldier or someone from the cookhouse, who rides a white charger, or a white steed, or a white nag – or even a flamin' 'orrible white donkey! For centuries they have bred their own horses – and to date – those horses have been jet black! Now – can I trust either or both of you to sound the all-clear?!"

Jack said nothing, which he thought was his best course of action, and instead gave Gregor a hopeful look.

"Yes, sir, I'll see to it straightaway," said Gregor in a small voice.

He marched off at double time to try and bring calm to the chaos he and Jack had erroneously caused.

As for the colonel, he gave Jack a withering look as he marched off, muttering "Not again!" He would once more have to explain to the top brass why there was no need to convene an emergency meeting after all. But Colonel McCann's bark was far worse than his bite. Within an hour he would be as right as rain and perfectly affable, even to the lowest ranks.

About a mile away from Krickenstaltz, beyond the forest, Stephan Drax of the Bucharest Riding School began his trip back to his ridinge stablishment. Jupilon, his beloved white charger, felt the tug on the reins and began to gallop homewards.

Drax didn't see him, but a warlock scout hidden among a small copse allowed Drax to pass, and with his whip, he too ordered his horse – his jet black steed, to go at a gallop.

"Vait till Zezk 'ears vot I know," he said to himself.

The scout rode off like Paul Revere, smug in the knowledge that he would be the one to let Zezk know that they can advance on the British, or any other nationality that happened to be at Krickenstaltz. He whipped his black steed even harder as he approached the higher reaches of the Hagelbarm Mountains.

Inside the War Room of the Citadel of Krickenstaltz was a huge, round wooden table, for use by Council members, senior military commanders, and representatives of the four magic hemispheres of the world. This ensured representation for every country in each of the hemispheres which were part of the WFW.

However, regardless of the all-clear having been sounded, a meeting had indeed been called, but this was a perfectly ordinary meeting, dealing with items on the agenda which did not currently include actually being under attack there and then by the enemy.

Although Professor Winch should have been in the chair, he had been excused on the grounds of severe exhaustion, as had Professor Pendragon. The elderly academic and intelligence agent had developed a high fever, and swollen glands to boot. Septimus Twigg had stepped in to lead proceedings and was currently addressing those assembled:

" . . . The majority vote on troop deployments in non-critical areas has been recorded, and the motion has now been passed. Thank you. Let us now move on to the next item on the agenda. . .

"Now, we have various proposals on the table, all of which concern the possible activation of the time crystals. As you all know, this has been seriously delayed, but I'm glad to be able to tell you tha—"

Septimus had been stopped in his tracks by the door suddenly bursting open.

"I'm sorry for interrupting, everyone, but we're surrounded by warlocks, and The League of Mordred! Thousands of 'em!"

It was Colonel McCann.

After making his shock announcement, the colonel just stood there, looking around the room waiting for some response. Septimus was about to say something, when in strode a refreshed but nevertheless very worried looking Professor Winch.

"Septimus? May I?"

"Certainly, Gabriel, I am glad you are here."

Septimus Twigg moved along to the next vacant seat to allow Professor Winch to retake his rightful place. The ordinary meeting was no more. This was now a Council of War.

"Thank you, Colonel McCann, I've just heard. Please be patient while I go through what is to be done."

"Yes sir, Professor Winch!"

"Easy now, McCann. Shout at the enemy, not in here."

"Yes sir! Er – sorry, sir."

Professor Winch continued and addressed the whole assembly:

"As you have all no doubt realised, Krickenstaltz is indeed totally surrounded by the enemy . . . Going by what I know for sure in addition to what I have just seen, I would say that at the moment they have, unfortunately, significantly greater firepower.

"However, I think we can put up a stiff defence against them, up to a point. The League of Mordred are the least of our worries. They will no doubt let their more bloodthirsty allies do most of the dirty work, but they can still out-gun us at the moment, if we give them the opportunity to do so. I think it is the airborne warlocks who are the greatest threat, especially with their trepannerblasts.

"Colonel McCann (mainly addressing the colonel but still ensuring the whole assembly was being informed), I want you to put together as many men, and ladies if need be, as you can spare on the battlements – split them up into groups of three, this is most important. They will be supplemented by irregulars who have been practicing certain spells with battle-wands. Professor Cornstone and Miss Grant will be liaising with you on this, and will explain it all to you in detail.

"We will also be putting up a defence shield. This will be considerably larger than would be considered the norm, and as a result should hopefully deflect the trepannerblasts. As a bonus, it should also take care of all other death-bolts, death-slices and so on that are fired at the Academy.

"However, on the ground it's rather a different story. Although the idea is currently a source of great amusement to both Vlad's herd and our own troops, we will have to team them up and they will have to make the best of it. They are faster, stronger, and lither than the usual species . . . and so are the impalas! (Professor Winch waited for a laugh, noticed that Septimus was about to chuckle loudly, only to be stared at by Engelbert).

" . . . Battle-wands will not be enough. For every soldier with a battle-wand, there has to be one soldier with some sort of traditional non-magic weapon. I'm sorry to sound gruesome, but this is war and we didn't start it.

"As for the deployment of the makeshift cavalry, timing is of the essence. They must be ready to advance on the enemy within the grounds, beyond if it becomes necessary, immediately upon my command – not a second before, not a second after. If we do this right, we will have the added advantage of continual death-bolts from the impalas, as well as what their riders are able to do. Have all of you got this?"

There were nods from most of those gathered.

"Colonel. . . ?"

"Yes, Professor, sir. I'll see to it right away," replied Colonel McCann.

"Good fellow, and thank you."

Professor Winch deliberately waited for the colonel to leave. He looked down, scratched his chin, and again addressed the assembly.

"I'm sorry to say, ladies and gentlemen, that I have not got a clue as to what we should be asking of young Michael. As you know, our glorious founder appeared to Anthony and I, and told us to look to the young Valiant, but look to him for – erm – for – er. . . "

Professor Winch trailed off, as there was yet another interruption. It was Mike – or was it? It looked like Mike, but it didn't seem like him, not in the way he was acting.

The professor saw his young charge stride into the room and walk purposefully to the end of the table . . . and then the whole room gave a gasp. Even Professor Winch was absolutely dumbfounded.

Mike was bathed in a golden glow. It surrounded his whole body, but it was wider and higher than Mike himself, shimmering, glistening and shifting around him, revealing what seemed to be an older man, somehow possessing him – but not an evil spirit – not by any means. It looked like a man in the prime of his life. He was tall while slender and muscular at the same time. He wore a king's crown, and he sported a well-trimmed blondish beard.

Emblazoned upon his chest was what we in the non-magical world think of as being the iconic emblem of England: three golden red lions. But to the people gathered in the War Room and to all of the proud citizens they represent from all around the world, it is the Magic Emblem of the Magical British Isles.

Although many such citizens live far from this sceptered isle, they nevertheless serve the mother country with great devotion and loyalty.

In his right hand, the spirit was holding a jewel encrusted, gleaming silver sword — Excalibur! It was Arthur Pendragon – King of the Britons! The kindly spirit so beloved by the WFW seemed to settle, aligning himself exactly with Mike. There were more gasps of astonishment as Mike's mouth opened, but it was the voice of their King!

"Come, my friends! Be of stout hearts! Sing! Sing with me! Sing to give courage to the brave men and women who stand against tyranny!"

The grim but determined gathering needed no more prompting. *The Magic Anthem of the Magical British Isles* soon boomed out from deep below Krickenstaltz.

'FROM THE HIGHLANDS AND GLENS! THROUGH THE HEARTLANDS AND FENS! O'ER ERIN THE GREEN! TO THE LAND OF MY FATHERS! MAY WE TAKE HEART FROM YOU! VALIANT ARTHUR THE TRUE! AND WHEN HONOUR IS DONE! MAY WE JOIN YOUR ROUND TABLE! AS WE FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT!

AS WE LIGHT THE GOOD LIGHT! AS WE SOW THE GREEN FIELDS, GROWING YOUR TRUTH AND LOVE! MAY YOUR MERCY NEVER LEAVE US! MAY YOUR COURAGE ALWAYS LEAD US! TO OUR GRAVE ON FROM OUR COT! MAY WE REACH OUR CAMELOT!'

Although the words seemed to be elitist in mentioning Arthur's realm alone, it had nevertheless been adopted by the WFW, and was honourably accepted as being symbolic of the worldwide struggle for peace, love, and unity. As the WFW had become established and had grown, Arthur's realm was considered to be the whole world anyway, so neither the personal sentiments nor the limited geography of the song were ever a problem.

Once was obviously not enough for Arthur.

"Again, my friends! Let the whole world hear you sing!"

Although slightly distracted by a councilful of lusty voices booming up from deep within the Academy, Colonel McCann had carried out his orders to the letter.

There were many units of three on the battlements, ready with their special Defence spells. The impalas had been matched up with the men of the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment. For every battle-wand there was a more gruesome weapon deemed so unfortunately necessary by Professor Winch.

The enemy had indeed surrounded all of Krickenstaltz and its environs, and Zenith was yet again seated in his airborne broomstick sedan.

Zenith had taken his odious army to the rear of Krickenstaltz, hovering at about a hundred feet up, in between the rear walls of the citadel and the sheer face of the hill it was built onto.

The warlocks had decided on an assault from the forest. A great many were on broomsticks high above the hastily erected steel fence, and it was obvious to all how futile this really was. It may wel lkeep muddied and thirsty Australian backpackers at bay, but it was not going to stop the warlocks. Even the ground troops had commenced cutting holes big enough to drive a bus through it.

There was a deathly silence among both enemy gatherings. This was unusual, especially for the warlocks. Maybe the overwhelming power of love and hope emanating from Krickenstaltz had silenced the evil that was the enemy. Or maybe it was out of curiosity for sounds coming from the magic citadel.

Arty Babes had ordered yet another rendition, and this time word had been passed to everyone in Krickenstaltz to join in. From the War Room to the domestic staff, to the troops on the ground, and to the guards and the Irregulars on the battlements – all joined in with great gusto.

Finally, after the eighth rendition, King Arthur, still speaking through Mike, gestured for silence.

Those assembled in the War Room felt their hair stand on end as they could still hear those on the front line belting out the stirring anthem. The voice continued:

"To you, people of peace. To you who wish harmony rather than discord, look to this boy who has the heart of a courageous knight of Camelot. It grieves me so to see my realm and the whole world in such peril. It grieves me that I cannot fight with you and for you today, but my hopes – and your hopes – rest on this young man's shoulders.

"But beware! His fight shall not be the fight for Krickenstaltz – that is your grave task. His is an even greater burden. The battle for freedom and the preservation of a world of honour and high order – has many fronts! Only a knight of Camelot can prevent the rise of eternal evil!"

The spirit of King Arthur left Mike and turned to face him. Mike just stood there, still in a trance-like state, but he was somehow able to obey the kindly commands of the old king.

"Kneel, young Valiant," Arthur said, gently.

Mike knelt while still staring straight ahead. The spirit of King Arthur gently raised Excalibur, placing it gently on Mike's left shoulder and then his right.

"I dub thee Sir Michael of Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz. Arise, Sir Michael!"

Mike stood, although still seemingly oblivious to the momentous occasion.

The usually dour Engelbert Osbaldeston rose from his seat and began a round of applause, which was taken up with great enthusiasm by the others.

The kindly spirit smiled upon the gathering for a few moments, before once again gesturing for silence.

"I have to leave you all now, but before I depart, I have decreed that the young Valiant shall have what is rightfully his for the deadly struggle ahead. I give him — Excalibur!"

The centre of the table in the War Room suddenly lit up with a similar golden glow that still surrounded Mike. Then – gradually – the mystical, magical sword of Excalibur began to fade from Arthur's side while at the same time gaining a very real state upon the table.

Arthur and the newly knighted son of an ex-bus driver were again as one.

Mike, still in his trance, suddenly walked over and carefully lifted Excalibur. He stood back and held the famed sword aloft.

There was more thunderous applause which had those on the battlements wondering what on earth was happening. As the ovation continued, the golden glow from within and around Mike faded.

Soon, the spirit of King Arthur was gone.

Although he was still in a trance, Mike lowered Excalibur. As he gradually returned to the here and now, Mike blinked and looked nervously about his strange surroundings – and fainted, with Excalibur clattering onto the floor.

Professor Winch rushed over and picked Mike up. He asked for one of his more muscular colleagues, Field Marshall Brad Kowalski of the American Delegation, to take Mike back to his room.

As the professor had business to attend to elsewhere within the fortress he took temporary leave of the War Council. On his way out of the War Room, he gestured to Septimus Twigg that he wanted a quick word.

"Septimus, I think it would be an idea to suspend the meeting for now. Please use the lull in proceedings to allocate emergency duties for those based here, and just as importantly, give all other civilians the option to either stay and help, or leave for home. I'll be with the guard commanders," said Professor Winch.

Septimus nodded and resumed his post as deputy chairman of the WFW Council.

The shock to his system had been too much. Even before the grim-faced but kindly field marshall had managed to put him to bed, Mike had slipped into a deep sleep, snoring and drooling all over the big man's back.

Mike finally came round over two hours later. He opened his eyes and saw many of his friends smiling down at him.

"And you were there, and you were there, and Toto was there, too," said a grinning Josh Beecham, while Mike looked at him blankly. Mike had never, believe it or not, seen the Wizard of Oz.

"How are you feeling, Mike?" asked Professor Winch.

"Funny you should ask that, Professor, I had a strange dream. Don't laugh when you hear this, but I thought I was being knighted by King Arthur, and what's more, he presented me with Excalibur! Dreams can be so daft, can't they?"

"I've heard it all now, Mike!" joked Josh. "Or is that Sir Mike of Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz?!"

"Yeah, I know, crazy isn't it? Hey, hang on! How did you—"

"Is this the sword, Mike?" joked Gregor, who rather irreverently held Excalibur aloft. He then tried to jab thin air, which again saw the sword clatter onto the floor. A very wimpish feeling Gregor just stood there, blushing and looking aghast.

"It's King Arthur's sword, Gregor, not the Count of Monty Python's! And show more respect!" said Estella, who wasn't joking.

"You're right, sorry," said Gregor, who carefully replaced the sword against the wall. "And it's Christo."

"So it was all true, then?! I really did see King Arthur?!" exclaimed Mike.

"Yep!" said Big Bill. "Oh sorry – yes, Sir Mike!"

"Too late, Bill, I've already said that," said Josh.

"Sorry, wasn't listenin'. Me belly's grumblin'."

Professor Winch gave his inane smile and twiddled his fingers, a sure sign for the others to keep quiet.

"Yes, it's all true, Mike, but herein lies the problem. Apparently, this isn't your battle after all. The ever cryptic King Arthur did not, in his infinite wisdom, grace us with a few more answers. I dearly wish he had done so. In fact the way things are going, I am hoping someone bursts into the room and gives us all a clue exactly what it is you are supposed to be doing, where you are doing it, and just as importantly – when. . . "

"PROFESSOR WINCH! PROFESSOR WINCH! THE TIME CRYSTALS OF

GLASTONBURY HAVE BEEN STOLEN!" yelled Professor Cornstone, bursting into Mike's room.

Although this was very serious news, it gave the informal gathering of Mike's bedroom some valuable insight as to what would happen next where Mike was concerned.

"I think you are off to Glastonbury, Mike," said Professor Winch with a smile, before turning to the others. "This complicates matters of course, but at times like these all we can do is to go with the flow, and for now at least, we seem to be flowing towards Glastonbury.

"All of you, please wait here, you will need to be available for deployment at a moment's notice. As for me, I have some more rejiggling to do concerning the troops on the battlements. I believe we are now a little short-handed. . . "

Earlier, after ensuring Mike had been taken back to his room, Professor Winch had, to the chagrin of Colonel McCann and other senior officers, borrowed some of the three man (and woman) units originally designated for duty on the battlements.

The forward thinker, duly aided by Arthur's dramatic appearance and incredible show of faith in young Michael Miller, had realised that Mike was not to be alone wherever his quest might take him from now on. He had immediately issued orders to most of Mike's fellow team builders and irregulars to remain close by Mike at all times, no matter what, until the war was either won or lost.

But Professor Winch had to find reinforcements somehow, especially those who could quickly become proficient at carrying out the planned Defence spells. Off he went to try and do just that. And if this meant drafting in kitchen staff, stable-hands, or even a batman or two, no doubt to much huffing and puffing and 'tache-twitching from officers who would then be stuck making their own lemon tea for the duration, then that is what he would have to do.

"Are you OK, Mike?" asked Estella.

"I'm fine now, Estella, but what is happening? The last thing I remember was sitting in the dining room all on my own. No-one came out with any lunch, I couldn't find Ellen or anyone, so I made my way back here. Next thing is, I have this crazy dream which wasn't a dream at all!"

Estella looked at the rest of the cramped gathering in Mike's room. Although their faces were grave, she saw that they all gave the barest of nods.

"Mike, we are at war, good and proper. What you have experienced so far, the skirmishes, the espionage and so on, all that was just a prelude to the real thing. King Arthur's presence has no doubt been prompted by all this, and yet again you seem to be our only hope. Now try not to worry, but we are surrounded by the enemy, and we are expecting an attack very soon."

"War! A real war?!"

"Yes, Mike, a real war," replied Estella, who thought it rather a stupid

reply, but suddenly remembered he was still a boy being asked to do a man's job.

Josh saw the panic in his young friend's eyes.

"I know that you are courageous, Mike, you would not have the blessing of King Arthur if you were not. Just for the moment, however, I think you are allowed to be a little selfish.

"Regardless of what happens here, you will at least be safer in Glastonbury. I can't promise things won't get rough there at some point, but it couldn't possibly be the same as what is going on here at the moment. It's tough, I know, but please do your utmost not to dwell on the fate of Krickenstaltz."

For a moment, Josh thought he had overplayed his hand, he could still see real fear in Mike's eyes, but then Mike seemed to relax.

"I'll try, Josh, everyone, I'll try. And there's no point in lying here, is there? I'm getting up." Mike pulled back the duvet and got up out of bed.

But just as he had been on that morning aboard Wimpole's Magic Caravan, Mike was stark naked, but again he didn't know it until it was too late.

"AAAAAAARRRGGGHHH!"

Estella smirked and turned away. The rest of his visitors cheered, whistled and clapped. Mike went a deep red and grabbed a towel.

"'Ere, Mike! If yer gets in a scrape, yer can jus' moon at 'em!" said Big Bill.

To save Mike any further embarrassment, Estella quickly bustled the chuckling Irregulars out of the room. Without looking around again, she told Mike to meet them all in the dining room for tea, a very early tea – they were heading for a very busy evening indeed.

As his friends began to leave, Mike was frowning.

"Josh, could you hang on a minute please? I want to ask you something, a few things, actually. . . "

Josh let the others walk on. When all was clear, he shut the door and walked back over to Mike, who was just finishing dressing.

"Thanks, Josh. I know this is going to seem daft, but when we go off to Glastonbury, or anywhere else for that matter, do I carry Excalibur, you know, on show, like, around with me?"

"Hmmmm – I see what you mean . . . but too many King Arthur films, I think, Mike. No, this isn't quite like ancient times, it will serve no purpose to have Excalibur permanently on show. Don't forget, we're not going back in time, the Glastonbury we're going to is the modern day Glastonbury. Can you imagine going into McDonald's for a burger and a milkshake while holding your sword? They'll think we're robbing the place. 'Oh sorry, Professor, we didn't make the battle, we were all locked up for the night!'"

Mike laughed at the very thought of this highly comical but of course highly unlikely scenario. However, a frown once more displaced the smiles, and Josh knew to return to more serious matters.

"What else is on your mind, Mike?"

"This war: what about ordinary folks? Can they see the enemy? Will they

be involved or affected in any way?"

"I'm very sorry to say that it is highly likely, if things do not go well for us. Worse still, their chances of success against the enemy are far, far less than our own. We are quite remote here so word won't reach the city just yet, but anyone who strays this far at the moment, is likely to be – er – er. . . "

"Killed?" guessed Mike.

"Yes, Mike, I'm afraid so."

"Oh," said a very downcast Mike.

"Come on, Mike, be positive. It might not have been our time, but the world has faced such evil before and come through, hasn't it?"

"Yes, but at what cost?"

Josh just half-grimaced and half-smiled before giving an evasive reply.

"Come on, let's get some grub, if the big fellas haven't already scoffed the lot."

"Yeah, you're right."

"About what?"

"They've probably scoffed the lot!" said Mike, as they went off to join the others from their elite troop.

61

Over the Hill with the Sword of a Fourteen-Hundred year old Man

IMMEDIATELY PRIOR to the awaydaying tunnellers finding themselves in Sefton Church, the members of the Local History class had abandoned their brass rubbing session and had ran out of the church in a state of dread fear. This was from what they had perceived to be the restless and impatient spirit of a Romanian mystic.

Not too long after the history class had ran outside shouting and screaming, the awaydayers had finally made it up out of the tunnel and into the church.

After only a short stay, Marina had of course peformed the Reverse spell to return the sightseers to full-size. Although the awaydayers would fortunately never know of this, the veritable boom! and intense light which accompanied the casting of the spell were to set off a chain of events which would have serious consequences for the already beleaguered powers of good.

A more immediate consequence of the boom, the dazzling light and the vibrations which rocked the church, was that a shocked and stunned Reverend Waldrom had come running into the church.

As he dashed through from the presbytery, the vicar was expecting to find that the centuries-old gothic and Norman architecture had been reduced to rubble, caused by what he had assumed could only have been a bomb going off. However, apart from the mess left behind by the terrified brass rubbers, all seemed as it should be.

"I need a holiday," said the over-stressed cleric, scratching his head.

As the mystified, worried and yet nonetheless relieved Vicar of Sefton Parish Church turned to go back into the presbytery, he did not see or hear something small, roundish and shiny dislodge from its setting on Leonara's tomb and fall to the ground. This was a small crystal – a perfectly ordinary crystal, mostly, but its inner core was made up of fragments of the Time Crystals of Glastonbury. These contained very powerful magic, and even tiny fragments of these had powers that could be used to control time, people, and even the spirits of those who had long ceased to live and breathe.

In the wrong hands the crystals could also be used to wreak global chaos and carnage. This was not with the same stylised violence of the Chaotagens, but if ever used to destroy rather than resurrect or preserve, then the end result would be pretty much the same.

Unfortunately for the vicar, neither had he noticed that Madam Leonara's tomb was glowing brighter and brighter.

As he passed by the tomb, the light suddenly filled the whole church.

The Reverend stopped, dumbstruck. The light suddenly contracted and enveloped him, and in an instant it had invaded his body. He felt a huge jolt as the frightening energy source became part of his very fibre of being.

Reverend Waldrom's usually friendly features changed drastically. His eyes became bloodshot, his face was now heavily lined, and he adopted a leering, evil grin.

Although he had been possessed by the malevolent spirit of a mediaeval Romanian sorceress, in fact a female warlock, it was still the masculine mind of the vicar which defined his ghoulish self. He looked around him – and was disgusted by his surroundings.

The vicar hurriedly left his normally beloved parish church.

Courtesy of the evil spirit within utilising the local knowledge stored in the mind of the vicar, the now somewhat less than Reverend Waldrom moved on to the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool City Centre.

After booking himself in, he availed himself of all the travel information the hotel reception staff could supply, and went straight to his room to commence studying the various timetables and maps. He was looking for the quickest way to get to Glastonbury in the County of Somerset.

However, before leaving for this mystical town, he decided to go and roam the murky underworld of his host city. This was to try and procure something which was a quantum leap from the tree-hugging and peace loving community which characterised his next destination – and bullets to go with it.

*

Professor Ren Stannich was sitting at his desk musing on the latest disaster to befall the allies, when in walked Professor Winch.

The two professors found themselves in somewhat of an ironic situation. Although the time crystals had been securely housed for centuries on British soil, Glastonbury to be precise (hence their title), in the interests of unity, their ongoing care and safekeeping had been entrusted to mainland European members of the WFW. It was because of this that Professor Stannich was far more knowledgable on the subject than his friend and leader, Professor Winch.

"Ren, I've just heard. This is terrible news. How did it happen?"

"Ze only newz I 'ave, iz zat zumvon blew up ze chambers and zen took ze cryztals. Ze only witness sez zumzing about a mad vickar, but zey did not get a close look. Zat iz all I know."

"Hmmmmm – interesting. Now, Ren, how much do you know of the history of the time crystals?"

"It iz difficult to tell ze difference between truze and legend, but zey are suppozed to 'ave been devized by ze vorlockz using ze most evilest ov magick. Zey apparently vonted to control ze vorld by controlling ze time. Legend 'az it zat zey ver stopped in zer effortz by – er – Deeky ze Tiger, iz it?"

Despite the direst of circumstances with hordes of enemies at the gates, Professor Winch could not help but chuckle.

"That's Richard the Lion Heart, actually, Ren. You'd best be careful after what's gone on here today, old Dicky the Tiger might just turn up and challenge you to a joust!

"So, back to the crystals. I assume legend also has it that some of Richard's finest decided to do a little redistribution, so to speak, and that is how we came to have them . . . am I right?"

"Yez, you iz qvite right. 'Ow did you know ziss?"

"Just a hunch. But who on earth has stolen them? Is it the warlocks? If so, which of them exactly? Or if it was a lone effort, which one? Our scouts have reported Zezk is with his men, so are the rest of his evil commanders. And I doubt very much if any of Zezk's minions could have done it, so maybe there's something in this mad vicar business, would you agree?"

"Up until today I vud not 'ave believed it, but I 'az an idea. Zinz ve – er – liberated ze cryztals from ze vorlockz, zer 'az been many generationz ov zem 'oo 'az tried to steal zem back, but many ov zeez 'az diededz and 'ad been sealed in zer tombs by fragments ov ze cryztals. Az impozzible az it soundz, it seemz az if one ov zeze spiritz 'az been released, and 'az perapz pozzessed zum poor 'oly man."

"But how? And why? If they were sealed in their tombs, how is it that the magic has failed?"

"Becoz ze magick iz in ze cryztal fragments and not ze tomb itself. Ze fragments, vich are encased in ordinary cryztal, must 'ave been removed – most probably by accident."

"But why not deliberately? Why couldn't it be that someone knew precisely what they were doing and released the evil spirit?"

Ren smiled. Similar to Professor Cornstone at his worst, he enjoyed occasionally getting the better of Professor Winch, but unlike Professor Cornstone it was never malicious.

"Becoz I do not believe zat zer iz anyvon left 'oo 'az any knowledge ov zer existenz, or even ze veraboutenz ov ze cryztals or ze tombs, outside ov our community. Unless ve 'az anuzzer spy, zat leaves only ze malevolent spiritz."

Professor Winch sighed and nodded, accepting that his friend's slant on things sounded logical, but still far from solving the mystery entirely.

"Absolute certainty is a luxury we have not got, Ren, maybe we never have had and never will, but I'm reasonably confident that there are no more spies in our camp, so it does indeed seem as if the spirit of an ancient warlock has been released, most probably by accident, and has immediately hot-footed it to Glastonbury. What is even more worrying is, could this – er – malevolent spirit team up with the modern day warlocks?"

"It . . . dependz. Posseebly. All-zo ze cryztals 'ave been taken, ve do 'az magick in place to prevent zer removal from Glaztonberry, but az you know, nozzing iz zertin. Zer may be powerful magick vich can overcome ziss spell. I 'ope not, but . . . vell – er – zer you are. . . " said a hesitant and

embarrassed Ren Stannich.

Sadly, the old professor did not seem to have much faith in such protective magic. This was despite it being formulated by none other than Ren himself and the elders of Krickenstaltz – rather than the British Magic Council or even just Professor Winch.

"This is terrible, Ren. Only days ago we were able to discount the Chaotagens, but now we could have the time crystals used to defeat us instead. . . "

Ren Stannich looked forlornly at his leader, but said nothing, but Professor Winch could see the worry behind his old friend's eyes.

"Look, Ren, it is imperative we get the crystals back – and fast. It is with this in mind that I am sending Mike and his friends off to Glastonbury. Once there, they will commence rooting out the thief, and success in this may well provide the impetus to go on and recover the crystals. They will of course, be aided in their task by our security seal. If the magic holds up, the task will be made at least a little easier by the thief being confined within the town limits. However, it would still be helpful if we could widen our investigation. Do you happen to know just how many warlocks were sealed in their tombs by these fragments? Better still, do you know the exact locations of the tombs in question?"

Ren nodded and reached into his desk. He pulled out a folder which he immediately passed to Professor Winch who hastily opened it and read its contents: a list containing the locations of twelve burial sites. Some of these were tombs inside a church, crypt or vault, and the rest were in graveyards, three of which belonged to a church with two being municipal cemeteries.

"This is excellent, Ren, we must put together another task force to check each one."

Ren smiled at his friend.

"I 'ave already done zat, vell almost. Eleven 'ave been checked and are still secured. Ze last von iz in Zevton Church, zumver near—"

"I know, Ren, Liverpool. . . "

*

"Ezekiel? Professor Winch here . . . Yes, hello to you, too . . . Now, my good friend, I have a little job for you. . . "

*

"Daphne? Come to my office, please, I need a little chat," said Ezekiel.

*

It was Friday evening.

Three very elegantly dressed ladies, strangers to the Parish of Sefton, stood in the back row of Sefton Church. They were surprise attendees at a Harvest Festival service.

After Professor Winch had spoken with Ren Stannich, he had made some initial enquiries of his own.

Although things were still far from being clear, the professor was inclined to think that a visit to Sefton Church would be useful at this juncture.

The service was being conducted by the Reverend Malcolm Jubilee, who was standing in for his good friend, Reverend Michael Waldrom.

All three ladies wiped tears from their eyes.

"This is beautiful! Absolutely beautiful! Oh if only they understood us!" said Florence, with Daphne and Agnes murmuring their agreement.

The three patiently waited while the Reverend blessed the veritable mound of food destined for the poor. Reverend Jubilee went on to say the final prayer, and then led the congregation in a rousing harvest time hymn to conclude the service.

The Reverend stepped down from the altar and walked back up the centre aisle. This was so he could say farewell at the door to all those who had attended.

The three ladies quietly slipped out of their pew and concealed themselves in a side chapel. Their plan was to remain hidden until the church had emptied and the doors had been locked.

After saying goodbye to the sexton and verger who had helped him close up for the night, Reverend Jubilee finally went off home, which was in the neighbouring parish of St. Frideswide's in Thornton.

Sadly, the vicar was not to enjoy a solid night's rest after working double shifts, far from it, he was to endure an almost sleepless night due to being extremely worried as to the whereabouts and safety of his friend and colleague.

The ladies all availed themselves of the illuminative qualities of their wands and began their search. They began checking all of the tombs, and although they did not quite know the full story, they knew they were to also look for a dislodged stone or crystal.

Daphne soon came across the tomb of Madam Leonara Zaragusta. She was about to hail her two friends, but before she could do so, Agnes gave out a yell.

"OOOWWWW–OW–OW–OW–OW!"

Agnes bent down on one side and grasped the end of the nearest pew. She gingerly sidled around and sat down, clutched her ankle, nearly swore, looked up, whispered an apology, and resumed her ow-ow-owing.

Her two friends rushed over to see what was wrong, but Florence almost slipped on something hard and roundish, the very same thing that had caused her friend to yell out in pain.

Florence managed to steady herself and grasp the end arm of a pew.

After she had recovered, Florence just happened to look down, and there on the floor was the offending article. "Gotcha! I think, ladies, we have the stone in question!"

"An' I fink we 'ave a matchin' pair. Just behind you's the tomb o' none uvver than Madam Leonara Zaragusta, Romanian mystic," said Daphne.

"And to clinch it, that poor Reverend's prayers about keeping his good friend safe. That's it, girls, let's go home," said Agnes.

For Agnes, home meant her little cottage on the Sussex Downs.

As it was the weekend, Florence had gladly accepted an invite from her old friend to stay over until Sunday evening.

The two old friends were now looking forward to a weekend of curries, Danish pastries and chicken in the basket, all washed down with generous glasses of wine in front of a roaring log fire at the local pub. And if previous visits were anything to go by, several bingo sessions would also be on the agenda.

At least this was the plan. . .

Daphne had also been invited, but she had had to regretfully decline due to being seriously behind in her marking of a considerable pile of coursework papers.

Daphne was home, just. In her tired mind was a vision of soaking her feet in a bowlful of lukewarm water with a goodly ladle full of Ma Hubbles' Foot-Soothing Powder mixed in, while munching on home-made brandy snaps and sipping a steaming hot cup of sweet tea. But any plans she had to turn such a vision of Heavenly bliss into a very real reality would have to wait – at least for a short while.

"Hello, Daphne, welcome home. How did it go?" It was Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph. The professor of course wanted to hear all about the harvest time sleuthing.

Hoping she wasn't in for one of Winchy's famed verbal marathons, Daphne sighed and quickly commenced relating all of the pertinent details from the three ladies' little adventure up north. . .

" . . . An' ir' all fits, Gabe. The vicar's missin', we've go' the stone, and I don't fink there's many Romanian mystics to be farnd buried in the British Isles, lerralone Sefton Church. I fink tharrin this case, we can assume the title 'mystic' is rarver understated."

"That is good work, Daphne, thank you, to all of you. . . Now, a favour if you would, please. Before settling down for the night, please contact your two fellow detectives and tell them to get themselves to Glastonbury forthwith. Tell them it's an order, not a request.

"As for your good self, I am sure you'll be pleased to hear that going by the Operatives' Emergency Rosta, it is your turn to stand down."

However, Daphne was not in the least bit concerned about an emergency rosta she was sure she'd never even heard of before, but she was very much concerned with being asked to do something she knew for sure was a 100% in the purview of Professor Winch, or, thought a resigned Daphne, it at least should be.

"But Gabriel! Surely you should tell 'em both yerself?! . . . Gabe? . . . GABRIEL! . . . " But Gabe was gone.

" . . . I'll flippin' fump that man one ov these days, I really will. Yeer!"

Professor Winch smiled with relief after such unfair delegation concerning the two feisty ladies, but he couldn't dwell further on the matter.

He kept the telemagickeraph on his desk and contacted his associate and old friend Peregrine Chandler, of the Joint Communities Liaison Committee.

"Hello, Peregrine? . . . Ah, very good, you're there. Long time no see or hear, eh? I had been hoping to bump into you at dinner one evening . . . What? . . . Some young thug has spoiled it? . . . Dear oh dear, we can't have that.

"Listen, Peregrine, I have something I need you to do. There is a vicar gone missing from the Parish of Sefton, near Liverpool. We urgently need to find him, but we do not know what he looks like. Can you use your contacts to get a recent photograph of him? . . . You can? . . . Good! Please get it to me here as soon as you can. Thank you . . . Pardon? . . . Oh – er – I'll see what I can do. Bye-bye."

Professor Winch tutted at his colleague's intolerance. Peregrine had asked if the young vagabond who had spoiled his and a friend's patronage of the Ayers Rock Annexe Dining Rooms could be barred from the establishment.

Professor Winch once again used his telemagickeraph.

"Would the Glastonbury Task Force please make their way to the sixth oak door, please. I will meet you there. Thank you."

Professor Winch arrived at the departure point at the same time as the reunified happy campers plus a few extra draftees. He smiled and then led Professor Cornstone to one side and spoke to him in a whisper.

"Edwin, this has become somewhat of a personal crusade for Mike. He has the favour of our glorious founder, and whatever happens from now on will invariably see Mike at the centre of it.

"However, not everything is clear, so please be prudent, especially in dealing with all trifles and trivial matters. Don't let Mike raise Excalibur and yell, 'To McDonald's, my ravenous comrades-in arms!', but let him come to the fore when the games afoot. Are you with me?"

"Certainly, Headmaster, certainly. But what about Burger King?"

"Edwin?"

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"Shut up."

"Yes, Headmaster, sorry."

And so they were all ready to go.

Along with the task force leader Professor Cornstone, also filling out the cold, cramped passageway waiting to depart were Mike, Josh, Edwin, Ernst, Estella, Gregor, Jez Gildebrand and Big Bill Dooley. Nathaniel and Jacinta Morse were also present. They had missed the team building but badly wanted to help on this occasion.

There was also Marina, and this time of course, Laszlo, who tried to pull his huge stomach in upon seeing the super-fit Mr Dooley.

There were also two others who were out of Professor Winch's sight. In fact they were hiding behind Jez and Big Bill.

The gathering were of course to meet the two redoubtable females en route.

Ernst considered offering to use his own special wartime issue TMG, which was very similar to the one owned by Josh, but he did not like being so free when it came to Professor Winch as he often was with his elder brother, so a cramped but traditional embarking it was.

Fond farewells were given to and from Professor Winch, and also Ren Stannich, who wanted to see them off as well.

"Ready?" asked Professor Cornstone. "Ready?" came the reply.

The professor placed the transmutagen into position on the door. "GLASTONBURY!"

Professor Cornstone opened the door and walked through.

The others quickly followed and soon found themselves in a torch-lit passageway. This had been hewn out of the rock, deep within the hill overlooking the mystical town. To most people this hill was simply known as the Tor.

Professor Cornstone addressed his fellow Irregulars.

"Listen up, folks. At the moment we are in the inner sector of – er – the Tor. For those who have not been here before, whether with our own fraternity or with ordinary folks, the Tor is the hill which sweeps down to the town."

"What's it called, then?" asked Nathaniel Morse.

"I've just told you! The Tor! It's a hill next to the tow—"

"I know what a Tor is, it's a fancy West Country name for a hill, but what is the hill's name?!" persisted Nathaniel.

"Look, Mr Know-it-all, keep this up, and you can take over and guide us all out of here yourself! All I know is, it's bloody well called THE TOR! OK?! As I was saying. . . "

But Nathaniel still wouldn't let it go and muttered on to himself. Unfortunately, this was still within earshot of not only Professor Cornstone, but everyone else as well.

" . . . So – we come across a hill somewhere, it's just the hill? 'Oy! Mr Hillary! What was that big rocky thing you climbed? Oh, 'the hill', was it? Silly me, I thought it was called Everest."

"Will you shut it, Morse! And the rest of you can pack that in!" demanded Edwin.

The others had been fascinated by the exchanges and were chuckling away hoping for more, but Nathaniel was nudged by the more diplomatic Jacinta, and so ceased his muttered diatribe.

Professor Cornstone glared at his heckler then resumed his little speech.

"Thank you! At the moment we are in the WFW sector, which was set up to make the kind of journey we are making right now. However, near the other side is a doorway which marks the dividing line between our own sector and the rest of the Tor which is accessible to ordinary folks.

"This brings me to the most important point.

"As I am sure some of you know, the whole town is an unofficial listening centre for – er – let's say the unusual, so we do not want to give reason for

every hippy in the country to come down here and have a hooley. This is why I must insist that all shop talk ceases as we approach the non-magic sector.

"Now – single file please, keep close."

"Are you all right with that, Mike?" asked Josh.

Mike had packed Excalibur away, not in the more usual scabbard but in an angler's bag for carrying fishing rods. This had been kindly provided by Anthony, and this had enabled Mike to carry the sword without drawing attention to it or him.

"It's flippin' heavy, actually, but I can manage for a while longer."

Two massive hands immediately reached out to relieve Mike of his burden, but not belonging to the same person.

"After you, friend," said Jez, withdrawing his hand and allowing Big Bill Dooley to help young Mike.

"It's a 'onour an' a pleasure," replied Bill.

"Thanks, I thought my arm was going to fall off," said Mike.

The Glastonbury Task Force walked on along a series of tunnels, some of which had been dug or blasted out centuries before.

The tunnels had been created to complement existing caves, and had enabled the creation of a single pathway which would take travellers right across the inner Tor.

Although its architects had never considered it as being its primary function, the pathway nevertheless allowed those who did not wish to make too public an entrance via the town gates, to reach the centre of town without attracting attention to themselves.

The group walked along mostly in silence, as it felt too strange to be indulging in small talk while walking in single file. But ten minutes into their subterranean hike, the silence was rudely broken.

"Cooee! Hello, everyone!"

It was our two feisty redoubtables, Agnes and Florence. Agnes walked right up to Professor Cornstone and poked him in the chest.

"You get it right this time! Do you hear?! We are only here on Professor Winch's orders, not because we want to spend who knows how long in this freak show, with you!"

"I can assure you, Madam, the feeling is mutual!"

"All the more reason for cracking on then, isn't it?!"

The human crocodile set off once more.

"Sir Mike, eh?" said Florence Koslovsky, Mike's music teacher.

As Florence was so small and seemingly frail, she could walk alongside Mike quite easily. She was smiling – at first. . .

"But it doesn't change a thing, young man! Don't come the high and mighty with me once we all get back to Hemlock Hall!"

"But I wouldn't – er – I – I. . . " But Florence was now laughing. A relieved Mike realised that his maths teacher was just joking.

"If she laughs any more her face will crack, not that we'd know the

difference," muttered Professor Cornstone, just as the wizards walking in crocodile fashion passed the whispering chamber of the inner Tor.

"Oh is that right?!" said an outraged Florence.

The now not so frail music teacher sidled up to the professor, and slapped him hard across the face.

"Ow! Not again!" said Professor Cornstone – again.

The task force walked on across the subterranean expanse.

A few minutes later, Professor Cornstone (while still rubbing his cheek), again gestured for everyone to stop, and also for them all to remain silent from then on. He spoke quietly to the group.

"OK, everyone, this is the end of our sector. See that door? (He pointed to a small, wooden doorway a few feet further down the narrow passage). Go through it in silence, one at a time, and immediately proceed up the staircase. This will take you up to the main exit. Go through that and you will be in Glastonbury proper. There will be crowds all over the place, but just do your best to act naturally . . .

"Rightyo, Big Bill and his new best friend first," said the sarcastic professor. "Only joking!" he rasped, as he saw Big Bill raise his massive fist.

Jez was through next and then came Gregor, but he stopped just before going through.

"Er – Professor Cornstone, what about the way we are dressed? Shouldn't we have changed first so we would not stand out?" asked Gregor, immediately forgetting the task force leader's dictat.

"Shhhhhhh," replied the professor, with a finger to his lips. "You definitely haven't been here before, have you?" he added in a whisper. "Now, keep quiet and keep it moving."

Soon all were breathing fresh air again, and the task force found themselves on a little piece of waste ground set in from the High Street. This allowed them all to remain in an informal gathering awaiting their next move, instead of drawing attention to themselves by jamming up the pavement.

After Professor Cornstone had hastily reorganised the taskforce, he pointed at what seemed to be an old public house further along the street.

The pub looked closed and in a serious state of disrepair. They all gave puzzled looks, shrugged their shoulders and followed him up the road.

Gregor ambled along with the others. He soon realised why they had no need to worry about their own strange garb.

Throngs of people were milling up and down the High Street and darting down side roads and alleyways. Most were dressed in an amazing variety of colourful clothing, while others wore all-black attire not unlike their own. There were people in multi-coloured dresses, ceremonial gowns, pseudo-ceremonial gowns; many wore jumpers, hats, caps and berets of highly unconventional styles and designs. Others wore robes, sheepskins, leathers, bright floral patterned saris, hessian ponchos and rough cotton mumus, as well as capes of every colour. There were even druids in dazzlingly bright

robes and wearing leafy crowns. To complete their cosmic ensembles, most wore a wildly differing range of necklaces, baubles, bangles, beads, crystals on chains, bracelets and earrings, and a variety of other adornments.

This diverse gathering all happily came together under the popular media banner, 'The New Age Movement'.

Although in modern times the area is perhaps more famous for being the venue for an annual rock concert (although the actual site is in Pilton, which is about seven miles from the town of Glastonbury), the town and its environs are actually sustained all year round, economically and spiritually, through its New Age status.

The shops along the main thoroughfare and down every side street all have the same cosmic themes. These placate and serve those who keep the mystical spirit of Glastonbury alive, year in – year out.

For ordinary tourists or even just everyday shoppers, it is hard to find anything but New Age concerns.

Such pilgrims come to Glastonbury with every belief under the sun, over it, and beyond it. They come for Celtic inspiration, Christian prophecy, Pagan worship, Gaelic poetry, Astrological enlightenment, Crystalline healing, the truth about Crop circles, Water divining, Aliens, Ley lines, and every other alternative 'ology, 'ism and 'onomy in existence.

But more relevant to the Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz contingents, a great many people also come along to hear and learn about a particular period in history, or plain mythology – depending on different viewpoints. They come to learn about something which has a great deal to do with the young man called Mike Miller, although they would never know of this modern day connection – the legend of King Arthur.

Our reformed irregulars and team builders reached the rundown tavern, the Avalon Arms.

Professor Cornstone led them all to the side of the building. He tapped his wand five times on what seemed to be a perfectly ordinary brick wall, but in an instant a doorway appeared.

"Step right in, everyone. This only appears for twenty seconds, so any stragglers and you've had it. I'm not having my pint of scrumpy ruined by anyone. In you go."

From a small tower on top of the Tor, a rather sinister looking gentlemen in a black suit and wearing a strange white collar, was looking through a pair of binoculars. The man was looking down on a group of people stepping into a public house. He had seen who seemed to be the leader of the group tapping on the wall with a wand. He'd had an idea anyway . . . but now he knew for sure – they were here for him.

The demonic vicar lowered the binoculars. He cursed in ancient Romanian, spat on the ground and walked off. Professor Cornstone was in first, followed by Mike.

On this occasion, apart from the doorway, there was not to be any further magically inspired defiance of the laws of physics. They did not walk into an

extravagantly decorated five star hotel far bigger inside than it was out – the place was a dump. The lighting was gloomy at best, the walls and furniture were grimy, the seats were ripped and the floor hadn't been washed for years.

To Mike, it reminded him of the run-down bars which always seem to feature in gritty crime dramas on the TV, where gaunt and desperate looking men whisper in corners, going over the details of their next armed robbery, or perhaps afterwards, discussing how to dispose of the loot until the heat was off. It of course follows that these self same dives are full of regulars who, when the Old Bill come calling, "Don't know nuffin'", or swear they haven't seen Cosher Flanagan for over five years.

Although he never said anything, Mike's less than favourable reaction showed on his face as clear as day, and was immediately noticed, by at least one of the party.

"What were you expecting, Miller? The Ritz?" said Professor Cornstone, who was in one step backward mode as far as his rehabilitation was concerned.

"I suppose so," said an honest Mike.

"Yes, I know what you mean, lad, but it's comfy enough. It will do us for now," said Edwin one step forward Cornstone.

They all seated themselves at various tables scattered around the lounge.

A small man with greased-back black hair in smart black and whites appeared to take their order. He saw Professor Cornstone and smiled, his still one white tooth among the rows of splintered black enamel, pinging in the one ray of dusty sunlight struggling to fully filter in through the one grimy window.

"Eddie! The boss never mentioned you were coming!" said a surprised John Michael.

"John Michael! Good to see you again!" replied a smiling Edwin.

After shaking hands, John Michael went behind the bar and poured Professor Cornstone a scrumpy without even asking him what he wanted.

The two old friends began to reminisce about days long ago. This was quietly at first, but the rest of the task force were amazed upon witnessing a side to Professor Cornstone they had never seen before.

The yarns and stories from both men's service days continued and were getting louder by the second.

" . . . So, I said to Toppo, go on Toppo! You show 'em!"

"Go on! Never!" said an enthralled John Michael.

"Yep. Honest. And that was just in the morning. Later that day, the Duke of Magicombe and his wife came round to inspect the squadron. Toppo shouts, "Bottoms up to the Duke and his good lady!" The Duke and Lady Miriam smile, they think it's a toast or a cheer or something. Next thing is, Lady M looks across, and her smile turns to a look of sheer disbelief. Toppo and his men had dropped their ceremonial battle-wands – and their trousers. They then turned around and mooned at the Duke and his wife!"

"You're having me on!" said a disbelieving John Michael.

"Nope. All true. If you don't believe me, ask Toppo himself next time you see him."

John Michael stopped laughing. He now wore a look of sadness.

"Oh, you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" asked a still jaunty Edwin.

John Michael told his old friend that Toppo had died at the massacre in the Hagelbarm Mountains.

Professor Cornstone was no longer jaunty. Turning away from his old friend and his fellow Irregulars, he cursed under his breath and thumped the bar top in anger.

"I'm sorry, things have been happening so fast . . . I didn't know he was with them," said Professor Cornstone. He turned back around, gave a big sigh, and raised his pint glass.

"To Toppo!"

John Michael echoed the toast, but then moved on from the old days.

"Are your crowd ready to order, Ed?"

"OK, you lot, make it something simple. We've much to discuss."

There were immediate replies along the lines of, "OK, Eddie", "Right you are, Ed," and even one mocking, "Whatever you say, Eddie baby", from Josh.

An hour later, after impatiently waiting for both Big Bill and Jez to finish off their third helping of steak pie and chips, Professor Cornstone drained the dregs of his third pint of scrumpy and beckoned for silence.

"Some of you may have heard of something called the Time Crystals of Glastonbury. For those who have not, they are a set of four large crystals that can literally control time. They are infinitely more powerful than Magi-chronometers, and can be used to forge hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. Equally – they can be used for evil and tyranny, which is something unacceptable to the magic community. The strange thing here is, we did not devise the crystals, the warlocks did.

"So – young Mike, let's see how much you really know. A very famous English king was alerted to the dangers of such power in the enemy's hands, and decided to liberate the crystals and bring them to England. Which king do you think this was?"

Mike smiled as he thought the answer was obvious, especially considering recent events. He even ignored the Morse brothers mouthing the answer, as he was confident he would be right. "King Arthur!" answered Mike.

Edwin smiled, and again he amazed everyone by his sudden warmth. It was a smile of friendliness. If he had misled Mike, his eyes let them all know that it had only been in fun.

"Nope! I knew you would say that, Mill – er – Mike. Anyone else?" 'One step back' Professor Cornstone saw Ted and Franky wave dementedly like teachers' pets in double history or combined sciences. He ignored them in favour of Big Bill.

"Queen Victoria?" suggested Bill.

"Hmmmm – might be, might be," jested Edwin. "Which king brought the

time crystals to England? Queen Victoria! My my – Anne Robinson would have some fun with you, wouldn't she?!"

It was lucky for Edwin that Big Bill was not in the habit of watching television, as his new career as a history teacher would have been painfully short.

But Bill wasn't that dim not to be able to recognise mockery and sarcasm when he heard it. He thought, smiled, nodded to himself, thought again, frowned, and realised he would have to defer the removal of Edwin's teeth – without anaesthetic – until there were no ladies present.

Edwin saw the glint in Bill's eyes and decided to crack on.

"The answer is . . . Richard the Lion Heart. He too was an early member of the WFW, although this is not widely known.

"To cut a long story short, the crystals have been stolen, or reclaimed, perhaps, from the warlocks' point of view, and we are here to hopefully steal them back again.

"The terrible truth is, the crystals have their own destructive powers which are at least equal to, or perhaps even surpass those of the Chaotagens. This is, of course, in addition to their time travelling functions. So we have to get them back or we've all had it."

"But who exactly has stolen them? Do we know who we are looking for?" asked Ernst.

"Yes and no," replied Edwin. "We know that it is the spirit of a dead warlock acting through a vicar, but at the moment we do not know what this vicar looks like, although we are waiting on a photo or something which will help us identify him."

"But wouldn't this warlock or vicar or whatever, be well gone by now?" asked Gregor.

"That is one thing we are sure of. There is no doubt that the robber will have tried to abscond with the crystals back to Romania, but some time ago now, powerful spells were placed on them to prevent this from happening. The instant they are taken from their settings, a one-way magic shield encloses the town, at least for the thief or thieves. This prevents them from getting out, and allows us or any authorised personnel from our community, in to the town, so action can be taken to resecure the crystals and apprehend the villain or villains.

"My guess is, our possessed vicar has booked himself in to one of the hotels or guest-houses in Glastonbury. He will no doubt use this as his base while he tries to figure out what is to be done."

"And what can be done? From here, I mean?" asked Estella.

"Oh, he'll probably have bacon and eggs in the morning, buy a water diviner for his housekeeper, a book on aliens for his nephew, stop for lunch, and then – er – destroy the world. . . " said the erratic one step backward Professor Cornstone.

Mike gulped and spluttered on his drink.

Josh shook his head and was about to challenge the combined sciences

teacher, but he was beaten to it by the chivalrous Ernst, who was not having Estella spoken to so sarcastically.

"I'm warning you, Corny, once more and you'll get a thick lip!"

A surprisingly placid Big Bill Dooley leant across and slapped Ernst on the back.

"Well said, Tiger! But he 'ain't worf it, 'onest. Saves yer anger for the real baddies. Besides, I've a dental appointment lined up fer 'im!"

"Ow!" said Ernst.

"You should have belted him one," said Agnes, while Estella just smiled awkwardly. She did not like being the cause of such unpleasantness.

Jacinta Morse decided to get things back on track.

"Well now, Edwin, what are your plans for searching for this – er – whatever he is . . . ?"

"Good point, dear," agreed Nathaniel, and rather quickly at that.

The amiable wizard and academic had only just tuned in to the conversation after realising he had left the kitchen tap running at home – with the plug left in the sink. He figured the more he pampered his wife and agreed with her every word and praised her every action, the less angry she would be upon returning to a very watery abode.

"This is the problem, really. I can't send you all out to look for someone when we don't know what he looks like."

"You can now," interrupted John Michael.

The friendly proprietor handed Professor Cornstone a print-out he had just received on his fax machine.

The professor turned to one side and quickly scanned the contents: a handwritten note and two photographs. He was about to read it there and then, but realised his old friend was looking over his shoulder.

"Sorry, Johnno, confidential and all that."

John Michael gave an understanding smile and went back to cleaning the bar area, while his old friend studied the fax in more detail. As well as a note from Professor Winch, the fax contained a photograph of a cheery looking minister of the Church of England, and next to this, a picture of a far more sinister character, almost as if the vicar had an evil twin. The note read:

'Edwin, this is a photograph of the missing vicar. However, while under the spell of a long dead warlock, he may look markedly different at the moment. The second photo is our impression of how he may have changed after being possessed. Please use the two together as he may resemble something in between, as it is difficult for us to be certain.
Winchy

PS. Those two rascals have conned me. Send Ted and Franky home immediately. I am not risking the lives of a whole family twice in one week, even if Jacinata and Nathaniel have told them they can go.'

A few minutes later. . .

"Look! Read for yourself! It is not my doing, it's the boss's orders! Please ask them to go, or I'll have to take this further."

Their highly relieved parents told both boys that they must return home. They had rowed with them about their wanting to come along only hours earlier, explaining that their being part of the recent rescue mission had been a one-off, brought about purely by exceptional circumstances. The order from the top had come as a great relief to Mr and Mrs Morse. This had made it easier for them to seem sympathetic, yet at the same time be secretly glad that such a direct order would simply have to be obeyed.

John Michael escorted the sullen and embarrassed young men from his premises, and calm soon returned to the gathering.

Professor Cornstone studied the two pictures.

The first was a picture of a perfectly normal, happy, contented vicar of the Church of England. The second was rather different. The vicar's face was heavily lined, his eyes were bloodshot around the edges, but with his eyeballs deathly dull rather than shiny. His skin was blotchy and his brow was heavily furrowed.

Just like in Aberystwyth, a wizard found himself eschewing magic and utilising the wonders of modern technology. Professor Cornstone quickly cut out the two small photographs and used the fax-cum-printer togenerate several copies of each.

"Pass these round please, Madam," asked Professor Cornstone of Agnes, who dutifully studied the images and passed them on.

"Blinkin' 'eck! Captain Black!" said Mike, as the possessed vicar reminded him of a goody turned baddy from the animation series, '*Captain Scarlet*', that he used to watch at home in Barnswick.

"Wharra 'orrible lookin' blighter!" said Big Bill. Josh took the picture of a perfectly ordinary vicar off him and passed him the other one. "That's better! Wiv a birrer luck, your reverence, we'll soon 'as yer like this again," said Bill to the picture of the demonic vicar.

Neither could help it: Josh put his head down and sniggered, while Mike burst out laughing.

"Easy, you two! This is deadly serious!" said an angry Professor Cornstone.

"Sorry," said the two as they tried to stifle their laughter. Soon all had studied the photographs.

Professor Cornstone, still shaking his head and tutting in Josh's and Mike's direction, moved on to the next stage.

"In order to find our man we will have to split up into smaller groups. Mike will be with me, boss's orders before anyone starts. And I think Josh and Gregor too. The rest of you, particularly the ladies, I'm not having you calling me a chauvinist or any of that nonsense, so please sort yourselves out.

"Please make sure your group has at least 1 copy of each photo and show these to as many people as you can in the short time we have. If we're lucky, someone may recognise our demented cleric and may even know

where he is skulking. If you find him, detain him and bring him back here. Understood? Right. Let's go."

Mike thanked Big Bill for helping him carry his burden, and picked up the fishing bag containing Excalibur. They left the pub in small groups to commence their search for the mad vicar.

The sinister man was again looking down from the tower with his binoculars.

"Zo, zey still lookenz for me. Zey vill pay for not letting me out ov ziss madzenouzen." He snarled, spat again, and walked back into the tower.

Although the Glastonbury Task Force did not attract attention from anyone due to their attire, they nevertheless soon had people tutting and muttering. They were stopping anyone and everyone on the street, and called in every shop, pub, restaurant, hotel and guest-house, to ask if anyone recognised either of the men in the photographs.

Even more annoying to the residents, shoppers, tourists and proprietors, was that every few minutes a different group of people were asking the very same question.

There were endless shakes of the head as people looked firstly upon the image of the kindly vicar, then at the picture of his evil alter ego. Professor Cornstone had almost decided to abandon this mode of enquiry and try something else, when finally he had a result.

"Yeah, I've seen 'im. Not along the 'igh street, though, up there on the hill. Look, he's up there now."

As Professor Cornstone and the others looked up at the little tower on top of the Tor, a man quickly darted out of sight, but the professor just about clocked him and knew it was their man.

"We're onto him! Ojs – Gregor, go and collect the others and bring them here!"

"Righto!" said Gregor, and ran off.

"Is there summat up, mate?" said the tourist, whom Professor Cornstone had instantly forgotten about.

"Eh? Oh, sorry – we're from '*Manhunt*', you know, that telly programme?"

"Oh, I see. Well, best o' luck to yer."

"Thanks," muttered Professor Cornstone, hoping that the tourist would move on and resume his tour. Bill, who had just come back at that moment, decided to help his unlikely ally by cracking his huge, tattooed knuckles.

"I'll be on me way," said the tourist.

It wasn't long before everyone had reassembled.

As they were on the High Street, Professor Cornstone was careful not to reveal too much and acted like a tour guide, ready to take his coach-load of day-trippers on the Tor tour.

The Glastonbury Task Force walked down one of the side streets which took them to the edge of the town and which led to the base of the Tor. They walked on and found themselves on a dirt track. This was on the flat for twenty yards or so, then it began to gradually rise, and eventually it became

rather a sharp ascent.

The rise became a little too steep for Jez and Laszlo. They wheezed and coughed as they struggled up the hillside, and at one point had to stop altogether. They were helped along by Big Bill and Josh, and to the out of condition pair's embarrassment, the ladies.

When they were well away from the town and high up on the Tor, Professor Cornstone turned to Mike who had dutifully stayed by his side.

"OK, Mike, I think it is time to unsheathe Excalibur." Mike gulped, but did as he was asked. "And best get yourself on up to the front, you'll be leading us from now on. Go on, son," said his surprisingly gentle guardian.

Mike looked further back down the line towards his fellow hill climbers. He sought out Josh and Estella, who in return gave the barest of nods. Edwin saw this but did not remark upon it.

Excalibur shone brightly in the late September sunshine. Although he did not mean to do so, Mike made himself look truly majestic as he lifted the sword high into the air, like King Arthur himself had no doubt looked when going into battle. Mike had had to do so because otherwise it would have just trailed along the ground, but maybe a raised Excalibur was more than coincidence – maybe it was an omen.

The ascending Irregulars suddenly found themselves in a swirling, cold, grey mist. They could not see an inch in front, above or around themselves, and they all stopped dead in their tracks.

Mike was scared out of his wits. For a split-second he felt ashamed and totally undeserving of either Excalibur or his title.

Mike felt an arm around his shoulders, an arm which was trembling.

"To be scared is to be alive, son – and alert," said Professor Cornstone, the owner of the trembling arm. "When this mist clears, keep Excalibur aloft, you'll need it – we'll all need it."

Professor Cornstone recovered his composure in readiness to address the others, although the grey mist still kept them all blinded from each other.

"Listen up, people. I have experienced this grey mist once before. More importantly, it means our man has gone and done what we came here to try and stop him from doing: he has activated the time crystals. I have no idea what he has done exactly, so we have no way of knowing who or what we will come up against.

"One thing I am sure of. He has whether intentionally or accidentally, widened what's called the Time-Shift Parameters, it is this process which creates this dense grey fog. More ominously, it means he has taken us along with him. I dearly hope we were the only ones within the extended range, but if some poor family of rambling picnickers is now in a state of sheer terror, then there's not much we can do for them right now, as we have our own problems.

"But just to show you there is always humour in a bleak situation: legend has it that the time crystals we are trying to recover, are actually Mark 2. Apparently the genius who formulated Mark 1 forgot to ensure the crystals

went too. As a result, the poor chap was never seen again, at least, not by folks from his own time. . . However, I digress . . . never mind the warlocks, let's worry about ourselves. . .

"Now – battle-wands – READY!"

Although his arms were struggling to do so, Mike still kept Excalibur aloft.

The others all held their battle-wands straight out in readiness to open fire.

The grey mist cleared and at first everything seemed normal, but it did not take long for the truth to sink in. They were still in Glastonbury, but not the modern version of New Age Central. The little tower was brand new. Scattered around the hillside were small croft houses with smoke belching out through the holes in the roofs.

They looked around and back down the hill.

In place of the modern town of Glastonbury, there were groups of little islands with ancient settlements in the middle of most of them.

Although they could not see all the way round the Tor, it was obvious that this too was an island. And the oddest thing of all, the lake surrounding them seemed to be full of golden coloured apples.

They did not have time to dwell much longer on their strange surroundings. The bemused friends could feel vibrations from the earth below them. They became stronger and stronger, then they heard them – the enemy. They were on horseback.

The thundering of horses' hooves grew louder and louder, the shouts from the enemy were all too clear.

"DEATH TO ARTHUR! ALL GLORY TO MORDRED!"

They could see them: the knights of the evil Sir Mordred. They rode like the wind, past the tower and on towards the heavily outnumbered Irregulars. Mike suddenly hoped it was like '*A Christmas Caro*l', where people from the past could not see visitors from the future – he was wrong.

"Steady lad! Steady!" shouted Professor Cornstone.

They were nearing rapidly. The knights of Mordred were evil, and looked it. Dull, black, badly dented helmets covered their filthy faces and long, greasy hair. Their chain-mail was still bloodied from their previous encounters.

Mordred himself led the charge, and he had decided to ride on toward the young Valiant, but to Mordred he was his sworn enemy – Arthur Pendragon, King of the Britons.

"Mark your target!" yelled Professor Cornstone. "Wait for my command . . . FIRE!"

Seven of the knights fell dead from their horses, but onwards rode the rest of the evil riders.

Mordred, who had showed great dexterity by slipping down on one side of his mount and swerving to the side to avoid being hit, sat bolt upright again as he was almost upon Mike.

As well as now being close enough to smell his rancid breath, Mike also noticed that his attacker's sword was very distinctive. It was jet black, very broad as well as long, and had a variety of weird emblems and designs

running down its length. The one that stood out most was a serpent with satanic eyes and a V shaped tongue which was sticking out. The devilish serpent was twisted around all the other evil insignia.

Sensing that his opponent was about to strike, Mike slightly angled Excalibur and swung it over towards him. Mordred tried to swerve his mount, but his horse did not react quickly enough. The Pretender to the Throne was knocked to the ground by the heavy blow from the famed sword, but luckily escaped injury as his chain-mail had not been pierced.

The horse panicked and rode off, leaving Mordred to stand and face Mike. He raised his sword, and with titanic strength he thrust it at Mike as if it was just a cutlass, but the young Valiant quickly bowed to his left and struck out again, this time cutting his attacker.

Mordred clutched his side, lifted a bloodied hand, and gave a sneering grin. He lunged again, but this time Mike held Excalibur like a cricket bat and Mordred's sword clanged against it. Mike's arm ached violently with the vibration, but he managed to hold on.

Despite his injuries, Mordred struck again, or at least tried to. This time Mike bowed to his right and the weight of Mordred's own sword saw him career around in a semi-circle and fall over. Just as he did so, Mike saw three bright flashes tear into Mordred's shoulder.

Thinking his assailant was dead, Mike went off to help his friends. This was just as Marina was being dragged off by two of the evil knights; they had kicked Laszlo in the stomach to make him let go of his childhood sweetheart. Mike ran after them, caught up, and lunged at one of them with Excalibur.

Although Mike had aimed at the knight's arm, he missed through losing control of his sword, but the direction and the strong momentum of the lunge were still enough to make a deep cut on the knight's hand, finally forcing him to let go of Marina. Tragically, the knight had still managed to stab her with a shortsword held in his other hand.

The second assailant was also forced to back off. This was after Mike had swung Excalibur from left to right, severing the knight's left arm.

The young Valiant looked to see how the others were faring.

His friends were all in a tightly packed group. Despite still being heavily outnumbered, they were managing to gradually reduce Mordred's army by rapidly firing off hundreds of death-bolts from their battle-wands.

Mike helped Marina struggle back to comparative safety behind the others.

The ever resourceful evil knights regrouped. Like Cheyenne Indians, they ducked down behind their horses while swinging deadly flails and spiked bludgeons over their heads.

As they neared the Irregulars, the lead knight swung his flail. This hit Laszlo, opening up a huge gash in his shoulder, causing him to totter and fall. He too was placed carefully on the ground, a few feet back from the heat of battle.

Mike ran out from the group, which by now had become badly depleted in terms of being an active fighting force. He launched himself onto one of the

knights' horses, and with the flat of Excalibur, swept the rider off and into the path of one of his evil cohorts. Mike dismounted, rolled over on the ground, and ran back to rejoin his friends.

The riders rode past the Irregulars then turned round and charged again. A huge lance was thrown which hit Estella in the shoulder. This time Big Bill Dooley did the rescuing, quickly dragging her out of the line of fire. Ernst looked over his shoulder at his injured special friend and was horrified, but he knew he had to carry on regardless.

Big Bill ran out into the path of one of the riders. He leapt up on to the horse, picked the rider up out of his saddle and threw him over a clump of bushes. Bill jumped down again and did his famous roll. This was timed to perfection as he leapt in between the still advancing evil warriors.

Mike raised Excalibur over the injured and managed to deflect endless flails, bludgeons and lances.

Big Bill now had four battle-wands in each of his massive hands. It was a mystery to Mike and the others as to how he did it, but as he rolled to avoid the thundering hooves, he fired off fifty-seven death-bolts in eight seconds, bringing down twenty-six riders.

All those who had received direct hits died instantly; these slipped off their mounts to the ground, their bodies getting trampled by their comrades' horses. A good number of the remaining riders were now badly injured.

Agnes, who had worked with Trixie in the medical corps many years previously, was also under Mike's protection as she quickly tended to the injured.

The sick-list was suddenly increased by one. Gregor had mis-timed his release of a death-bolt, raising his arm at the same time as a lance was thrown right at his heart. Through pure luck, Gregor had moved just a precious few inches, causing the lance to go right through his side instead.

Disaster struck again as Big Bill tried to get back to the little group, which now had more wounded than those left able to fight. They were desperately trying to deflect everything that the enemy could throw, swing, or fire at them.

Florence, although an excellent shot was not the fastest warrior wizardess, and was slow at raising her arm. The aged warrior was singled out by one of the attackers. He swung his flail right around, hoping to make a quick kill. Mercifully, the flail did not make contact with Florence herself, but it did deflect several shots from her battle-wand, resulting in a death-bolt ripping right into Big Bill's leg.

Fortunately for Bill, this weapon only lived up to its name in the event of a direct hit upon a vital organ. Nathaniel Morse kissed his wife and ran out to drag the big man back, but he was immediately cut down by a huge battle-axe.

Professor Cornstone, who had just managed to take out another six of the evil knights, decided to run out to rescue both of the injured men. Jacinta, although fearful for her husband, still battled on with her friends, but the

professor was held back by Jez.

"Cover me, Corny," shouted Jez, as he ran out towards the two injured men.

Everyone bar Mike, who was still deflecting a whole array of evil projectiles away from the injured, gave Jez volley after volley of covering fire. Three more riders perished, and Jez was able to help both men up and return with them to be placed into Agnes's care.

The now even smaller group formed a circle around the injured. There were still too many riders to count, and the Irregulars were soon surrounded by the Red Indian like evil knights of Sir Mordred.

The noise from the battle was tremendous: thundering hooves, the clash of metal, the blood-curdling yells, and the booms of many death-bolts. It was also difficult to see clearly with all the dust that had been stirred up in the action.

Despite their baldy depleted force, although of course the enemy had suffered greatly too, the Irregulars were starting to get the upper hand. With ruthless efficiency, they were consistently picking off Mordred's knights, one by one.

But eventually the little band of wizards and witches began to tire from the sheer effort and concentration they had had to put in, in the face of the relentless attacks from Mordred and his bloodthirsty cohorts.

What was a disappointment to some of the Irregulars, was that the knights did not seem to be surprised or disconcerted in any way at having to face a barrage of magic wand fire. But the wisest of the defenders knew it was highly likely that Mordred and his men had faced warrior wizards before.

Josh shouted something to Big Bill, who although badly bleeding was itching to rejoin the fray. Bill nodded and Josh crouched just outside the circle, and he too jumped up on to a passing horse and knocked the rider off. Although slightly hampered by his injuries, Big Bill limped right back into the battle and was soon atop next to Josh. The two rode straight into the twelve remaining riders. Less than a minute later, eleven were no more with the twelfth making a run for it.

Josh slowed the horse down on the turn, and the two men rode at a trot back to the rest of the highly relieved Irregulars.

But it still wasn't over. . .

Up from the muddy, bloodstained ground arose Sir Mordred himself. He waited until Josh and Bill were within range. He roared, lunged with his sword, and again fell down to the ground, clutching a now very badly bleeding shoulder.

Professor Cornstone slowly lowered his battle-wand. As well as being relieved that they had won the battle – he was also mightily relieved about something else. However, he was not going to share this concern with his comrades just yet.

Agnes shouted for help and in particular for water. Josh took himself off to look for a stream.

Mike surveyed the carnage around the Tor. He was sick to the stomach. He now realised what Josh had meant about not crowing at the death of an enemy, and he felt ashamed. He also knew deep down, that this little force had had absolutely no option but to defend itself in the way that it had done.

Marina and Laszlo lay in each other's arms – dead – but the others did not yet know this.

Gregor was not that badly injured after all. The offending lance had indeed gone right through him, but had missed any major organ or artery. Agnes quickly and expertly applied a liberal splattering of Magicrem XXX, the military issue of the magic skin replacement cream, and although holding his still painful side, Gregor was now able to sit up and talk to Ernst.

Estella's wounds had looked bad at first, but she too was comparatively unharmed due to the lance having gone right through the outer part of her shoulder. Agnes soon patched her up as well, and although it was still very painful, the pain had eased considerably from what it had been.

Nathaniel Morse, who had been unconscious as the battle had drawn to a conclusion, suddenly stirred. He opened his eyes, coughed and spluttered, and sat up and grinned. He owed his life to nothing more than a bullet-proof vest he had borrowed from a policeman friend, none other than PC Creek. The vest had indeed saved his life, but the impact on the vest from an expertly wielded battle-axe had knocked him out.

"My hero!" gushed Jacinta Morse, which made Nathaniel grin even more. It would not now matter if the water gushing from his house had formed a tributary of the River Thames and the house had floated off to Belgium, he could not do any wrong whatsoever!

Big Bill Dooley was a little too proud for his own good. He shooed Agnes away and tried to stand up to go over and talk to his big mate, but he took two strides – and collapsed in agony. Agnes shook her head as she went to attend to his badly cut thigh, with Jez smirking at the sight.

Josh returned with a helmet full of water and offered it to his wounded friends.

"OK, Romeo and Juliet, have a sip of this, it will help get your strength back. Marina? Laszlo? Oh no. NO! AAAAAARRRRGGGGHHH!"

Josh yelled and screamed with anger, frustration and grief.

The others quickly gathered around and the dreadful truth soon became clear.

"Oh, dear," said Professor Cornstone. "I knew it was too good to be true. I thought we were all OK, that we had all got through this together. This is terrible."

Many years of holding every worthwhile emotion deep down inside him came to the surface. The professor collapsed on the ground and wept; he was beside himself with grief for his two valiant comrades.

It soon became clear how unusual a day it had been for our Irregulars. Agnes Pollett, yet another sworn enemy of the Professor, knelt down and held him to her bosom, letting him release all of his grief and his anger and

his helplessness at not being able to stop the deaths of Marina Arazlavin and Laszlo Marinenkov.

The Irregulars could do nothing but cry for their friends and hug each other in their grief.

It was just as well, perhaps, that Marina had not shared some special news with the others before they had all departed from Krickenstaltz.

Laszlo had asked Marina to marry him. She had said yes. Marina had also apologised for flirting with Big Bill, although she did say to Laszlo she had done this to teach him a lesson; this was for buying her an apron for her birthday and a dustpan and brush for Christmas.

Professor Cornstone eventually regained composure and gestured for everyone to gather around.

"Part of being a soldier, even Irregulars such as us, is to carry on doing what needs to be done even when we do not feel like doing it. (Everyone nodded at this).

"Our next task is to bury our two comrades and pay them homage. As most of you may know, the bodies of those who have passed on cannot undertake magic travel of any kind, and this is why, tragically, we cannot take Marina and Laszlo back with us to be buried in the grounds of Krickenstaltz. (Most nodded, bar Mike whose countenance was ashen).

" . . . And then, although I know it will be difficult, we will remain civilised and we will bury the enemy's dead. (Again there were nods. This was at the same time as someone was slinking away into the distance. Professor Cornstone noted this, nodded to himself, and then carried on).

"When we have done this, we must find reserves of courage to carry on with the task we have been given, as we have not yet achieved what we came here to achieve, but for now – let us see to our two dear friends. . . "

Marina and Laszlo were buried high up on the Tor. Tributes were spoken. There were more tears as they all sang the Magic Anthem.

The Irregulars looked to the sky. Their grief eased slightly upon seeing the united forever Marina and Laszlo, walking off together to a gleaming Camelot. Although Marina had already spotted a speck of dirt on the portcullis.

They turn – smile – wave to their friends – turn back – and are gone.

The pain of grief may have eased a little, but the Irregulars tears flowed even more freely upon this sight.

Very reluctantly but still dutifully, the dead bodies of the enemy were gathered together, and they too were buried.

When this was completed, Professor Cornstone again asked everyone to gather around.

"I am not sure whether I should be telling you this, but the battle we fought was against the evil Sir Mordred and his men. . . I recognised the evil knight from his own sword, Beelzebub. It would appear that you, Mike, were mistaken for his sworn enemy, King Arthur, and that is why he attacked. I've no idea who he thought the rest of us were. He probably thought it was the

Round Table's day off!"

The gathering returned the laughter, although somewhat muted. The professor continued:

"Legend has it that Arthur died by Mordred's hand during the Battle of Camlan. The town of Camlan is some distance from here, and the battle was fought in the middle of winter. That fellow who slanked away was none other than Mordred himself."

"But shouldn't we have arrested him or something?" asked a confused Mike.

"No, Mike, we could not. We are not in our own time. Although we had to defend ourselves, I also had to ensure that we kept any disturbances to what the ordinary folks call the Time/Space Continuum to an absolute minimum. Mordred has not yet fought Arthur, so I had to let him live to go and do just that," replied Professor Cornstone.

"But surely we have changed time anyway, just by fighting Mordred and his men?" said Nathaniel Morse.

"Yes, you are quite right, Mr Morse. Although we preserved one of the main players of a future battle, it may well be that due to our efforts here today, we have adversely affected history somehow. I hope not, and the odds do favour us I believe – but no-one can be certain.

"However (addressing the whole gathering), if your local cake shop has a different owner when you get home, or if people in Milton Keynes are riding elephants to work, computers are allowed to get married and Eminem is the Archbishop of Canterbury, it means we have indeed stirred things up a little. I'm sorry to have to tell you that that's a risk we sometimes have to take."

The Irregulars realised the less than ideal nature of their circumstances and accepted Professor Cornstone's slant on the situation.

"OK, I think we can relax a while, but after that it's back to work. We still have a villain to catch, if he hasn't scarpered back to our time already."

"That's a thought. What if we're stuck here?" asked Josh. Professor Cornstone did not reply verbally but just shrugged his shoulders. "Oh," said Josh.

The tired Irregulars lay on the grass. Some talked among themselves, while others just lay there in silence, thinking of what they had just been through.

Professor Cornstone decided to walk up to the very top of the Tor, just to see what he could see. As he did so, he thought he saw someone in the distance to his right. He strained his eyes as he looked across, just as a man in a black suit ducked down behind a small outcrop.

Professor Cornstone did not react straightaway but decided to engage in some theatrics. He shouted back down the hill to the bemused Irregulars.

"Ah, it was nothing! Just a bird or a rabbit or something. Is that coffee done?"

The professor walked back down the hill. When he knew he was out of sight of the man in black, he summoned Josh, Ernst, Jez (reluctantly, but

Gregor was still in pain), Mike, and Big Bill who was still limping but otherwise in fine fettle. He spoke quietly.

"Our man is in hiding over there, but I now have a hunch as to what he's up to. We know that the crystals have gone: a secret chamber of ours underneath Glastonbury Abbey was blown up and the crystals were taken. Obviously it wasn't secret enough.

"But here's the clincher: the tourist pointed to the tower, I saw someone duck down behind it, and again just now our man was walking back over to the tower until we spotted each other.

"My guess is, he has stashed the crystals in there, and that is where they were activated.

"So – we are going to bluff him, or rather, out-bluff him. Mike is to stay with me out of sight, but we are going to let our man see you four. OK? One of you will give the signal that you have seen him, and then you are all to give chase. He will not want the crystals found, and he will surely lead you a merry dance all over the Tor, but not to the tower. Let him think he has lost you, then withdraw. Mike and I will race over to the tower and work as fast as we can to see if we can locate the crystals. Regardless of success or failure, we will be waiting for him as he eventually returns to the tower. You will follow as back up. Understood? . . . Right, get to it."

Josh, Ernst, Jez, and Big Bill Dooley went into pretend joshing mode as they ascended to the hilltop and meandered to their right.

" . . . So I said, 'Don't you think you've had enough?' But Daphne tells me I'm just like that gargoyle Winchy and goes to slap me in the face, but she falls off her bar stool and collapses unconscious on the floor, just as Winchy comes in for his weekly pint! YEEER!" said Josh.

The others roared with laughter and it wasn't pretend. But a few moments later the laughter ceased.

"Look! There he is! After him!"

The evil spirit of Romanian mystic, Madam Leonara Zaragusta aka the Reverend Waldrom, glanced anxiously at the tower, but then sped off in the opposite direction.

Mike, again with Excalibur drawn, was hidden behind a small rise with Professor Cornstone. They waited until the hunters and the hunted were far enough away, and then quickly ran over to the tower.

They walked in through the open entrance and were surprised to find it was totally bare. It certainly wasn't a bell tower. There wasn't a bucket on a rope, so it wasn't a well. However, the professor did notice that there were rectangular gaps in the walls on all four sides. At first he thought they could be arrowslits for crossbows, but he soon dismissed this idea due to knowing that longbows were the norm for most town guards of the middle ages, crossbows were more for elite troops, the Sheriff's guards and so on. The total absence of firing steps was further proof that the openings had nothing to do with bowmen of either persuasion.

After a little more musing he decided on it all being purely an observation

tower; if it wasn't this, then it was a very meaningless draughty affair.

What Mike, nor Professor Cornstone, nor any of the task force would ever know, was that right outside the tower, hidden under a hastily assembled pile of branches and a few rocks, were the bodies of two of the town guards. They had challenged the sinister looking man in strange apparel, and were killed for their trouble.

Just as importantly, there was no sign of anything resembling crystals or any containers that secured them.

"Looks like he's fooled us, Mike, there's nothing here. I think its back to square one."

Mike frowned and nodded in agreement. He was also once again tiring of keeping Excalibur aloft, so let the sword fall. As it hit the ground, there was a clanking noise of metal on metal.

"Hang on, Corny – er – Professor! There must be something buried underneath the soil!"

Although there was indeed something metallic sticking out just above the soil, it soon became clear that whatever had been buried would take a lot of effort to be brought back up.

Mike began to dig away the earth with the mystical sword, but he suddenly realised that perhaps he should not demean Excalibur by treating it like a spade or a shovel. He placed it carefully against the wall and began to dig away with his hands.

As it was not just topsoil but screeish type stones and pebbles, Mike got nowhere fast.

Professor Cornstone anxiously looked out through the gaps, he then knelt by Mike and began to help. Mike moved his fingers along an unseen but unfortunately very sharp ridge of metal.

"Ow! I've cut meself! Hang on! I think there's a handle. I'll try and lift the thing out."

Mike pulled on the metal handle, but whatever it was a handle to, it just would not budge.

"How the hell did he bury this so flamin' deep and so flippin' quickly?"

"His own magic, must have been. No time for a shovel or spade," replied the professor.

Mike just nodded and gave a blank look. He had really been talking to himself, but he felt a little awkward after the professor had replied as if this had been addressed to him. To Mike, it felt just a little too adult to adult.

Professor Cornstone again glanced outside. As there was still no sign of the demonic vicar, he helped Mike to try and release the buried treasure. They both pulled the handle as hard as they could, but whatever it was, it still would not move an inch.

"Hang on, Mike, we're not working together here. On three, OK? One! Two! Three!"

With clenched teeth and with their neck muscles bulging, they tugged and pulled with every last ounce of strength they had.

Finally, they felt the tension ease and caught a glimpse of movement in the soil. A split-second later they both fell backwards and landed on the ground on their backsides, as a large metal case launched itself out of the ground.

They stood, rubbed their aching rumps, and then dragged the case to the centre of the small tower.

After kicking the soil back down the empty hole and brushing the mud away as best they could from the case, the professor gave it the once-over in case of any age-old (or even brand new) booby traps. Thankfully there didn't seem to be any immediate danger, but he did find that the case was heavily padlocked.

"We'll soon see about that!" exclaimed Professor Cornstone.

The Professor pointed his wand at the case and muttered an incantation.

Streams of red, blue, yellow and even jet black lightning bolts hit the case, accompanied by booms, grey smoke, and what sounded like concentrated static electricity. It was as if a nest of pylons just happened to be sited in the tower.

Mike frowned. He was convinced that the powerful magic in play was likely to vapourise the contents, never mind just break the lock. But only the outer casing was affected. This split apart into several pieces of twisted metal which flew into the air, smashed into the sides of the tower, and fell to the ground with a thud.

The contents of the case turned out to be a steel frame, within which was set four large brightly shining crystals. Across the frame were a number of little winding handles.

Curiosity got the better of Mike. He went to turn one of the handles, thinking they were purely an ornamental steam-punkish affair to liven up the otherwise plain steel frame. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"No, Mike!" yelled Professor Cornstone, while grasping Mike's hand before he could turn the handle. "They are the time controls! If you turn them, we could end up a million years away!"

"No, my friends, ven I 'ave finished viz you, it vill be a meelion piecez, not years!" said the mad vicar.

Both Professor Cornstone and Mike turned around to see the possessed Reverend Waldrom sneering at them, and he was armed. Although a warlock of the middle ages would usually carry a wand, on this occasion the wandless but nevertheless resourceful mystic had acquired a Magnum 44 handgun. This is the most powerful handgun in the world, and he was pointing it at our two Irregulars.

The professor recognised the handgun immediately. It was the type of weapon favoured by Hollywood star Clint Eastwood when playing the character Dirty Harry in his most famous series of films.

While Mike just stood there frozen with fear, Professor Cornstone furrowed his brow, gave a darting glance at Mike's sword, and again decided to indulge in some theatrics.

"By the power of Arthur! How did you get in here?" The mad vicar looked

at the Professor and laughed.

"Ha! Your prezshus King Arthur! Vot use iz 'e to you now? You vill die, boze ov you, but not before I make you break ziss magick shield. I vill not stay in ziss madzenouzen a second more zan necezzary."

"So – er – you've beaten us. And to think were supposed to be soldiers of high calibre, it looks like we're really only low calibre, or even — EXCALIBUR! NOW!" shouted Professor Cornstone.

Mike did not need a further cryptic reference. He jolted himself out of his state of dread, and in one split-second movement he leaned over to the other side of the tower, picked up the sword and turned and lunged at the mad vicar. It swept the Magnum out of the vicar's hands, and with the continuing momentum went right through his chest, out of his back, and the tip lodged itself in the mediaeval but paradoxically still new mortar, impaling the vicar onto the tower wall.

Mike and the Professor just stood and stared – and then covered their ears. There came a terrible cacophony, a wild howling from deep within the vicar, with a bluey black mist emanating from the deep gash in his chest. The mist reshaped itself into a rapidly spinning whirlpool, which then disappeared deep down into the bowels of the earth.

The Reverend Waldrom was gasping and bleeding heavily and shouting for his bible. Mike gently retrieved a small travelling bible from the vicar's inside pocket of his jacket and passed it to him.

Reverend Waldrom lifted the bible to his face and brought the little ivory crucifix embedded in the front cover to his lips. The vicar kissed the crucifix. He was preparing to die.

"Not if I can help it, your Reverend!" shouted Professor Cornstone. He went to dash out so he could go and find Agnes, but he felt a restraining hand on his shoulder. "I'll go, I'm younger and fitter," said Mike.

"Yes, lad, you are right, but hurry!"

On his way back down, Mike was again feeling sick at the thought of having become a teenage killer, even if the restored vicar was to survive, this fact would not alter. Just about tempering these distressing destructive thoughts, was the fact that he knew it really had been a clear case of self-defence, both earlier on during the battle and just now in the tower.

Mike closed his mind to such morbid musings, and sped up in his quest to find and bring back help to the dying vicar.

As he dashed further on down the hill, Mike almost bumped into three out of breath red herrings who had chased the mad vicar all over the Tor. The fourth red herring was wheezing and coughing about twenty feet away, but to Jez it might as well have been twenty miles.

If Professor Cornstone had have known, he would have allowed himself a wry smile. The vicar really had out-ran his pursuers and he had indeed lost them for real. The malevolent mystic had availed herself of the body of a stout holy man in robust health. He had been a great athlete when he was younger and he still ran charity races.

The Reverend Waldrom was going a deathly pale, but Professor Cornstone noticed it was like a contradiction. His facial features, although contorted in agony, were once again softer and kindlier, and the deep lines had gone from his forehead.

Professor Cornstone held his handkerchief to the vicar's chest to try and stem the loss of blood.

"Th-th-thank you," gasped the vicar.

"Easy now, Father, easy," said the unusually gentle Professor.

The Reverend Waldrom gave a weak smile, but passed out just as Agnes came rushing in with the others. She quickly gave the vicar the once-over.

"Just in time, chaps, just in time. Pass me a towel from my bag, please, Mike."

Agnes, with help from Big Bill Dooley, carefully removed the sword from the vicar's chest. Bill cradled him, while Agnes worked to stop the bleeding and do the best she could with the huge gash.

Reverend Waldrom was conscious again, free of pain, and was bemused at this funnily attired assembly all watching someone who could only be a highly qualified nurse or doctor, but he thought it could only have been one drawn to alternative medicinal practices, emanating from somewhere like Glastonbury, perhaps. This misperception suited both the patient and doctor as well as the plethora of admiring medical students, right down to the ground.

"There you are, your Reverend, I've done what I can with mag – er – first aid, but your wound is so deep you will have to see a doctor or go to a hospital when you get home. Don't worry, you'll live. OK?" said Agnes.

"Thank you very much, my dear, and to the rest of you – er – students, is it? You have a fine consultant here. My my, I'll never call alternative medicine hogwash ever again! Now this may sound odd, but can any of you fine people tell me exactly where I am, and why I – er – was impaled on the wall with a rather large sword right through me. . . ?"

The Reverend Waldrom was now back at Durham University, sporting a beard, a big thick wooly jumper, drinking brown ale and singing Geordie folk songs with his best friend, Sub-Deacon Malcolm Jubilee.

Professor Cornstone replaced his wand after he had finished administering FDP to the bemused man of the cloth. He then raised his arm to get everyone's attention.

"Jez and Big Bill, hold his reverence as best you can, please . . . Gather round, everyone, that's it. Now – here is the situation. . .

"I am not risking taking the crystals back to the Abbey, and as time is truly of the essence, we are going to use them to get us back to Krickenstaltz.

"You may be interested to know that the four crystals originally represented the four main tribes of Warlock. Obviously this included the Bucharest mob, but there were also the Warlocks of Sofia, Dresden and Prague.

"Our spirit friend must have thought he had activated the Bucharest

crystal, but what he did not know was that long ago we had altered the crystals to suit our purposes. They now represent Hemlock Hall, Krickenstaltz, Glastonbury and Camelot. However, here is the twist: the last two, if activated, will only transport its users to and from King Arthur's time. On this occasion it was thankfully with the crystals, which, as I mentioned earlier, isn't always the case.

"One thing I should have realised sooner: the protective magic obviously does not react to time, only space. That is one for our glorious leaders to chew on methinks, as such a limitation has cost us dear today.

"However, despite not reaching Bucharest, the spirit must have thought it was his birthday when he saw Mordred and his knights gallop over the hill to attack us. So – history lesson over – it is time to go. . . "

Professor Cornstone bent down over the frame to check if the crystals were still firmly in place. They were. The crystals had been arranged in alphabetical order, left to right when in front of the frame in relation to the place they represented, but something was irking the professor, a little. He once more addressed the troops.

"Right, folks, I think we have a slight problem. In order to travel back to our own time, I now have to deactivate the magic shield. I can do it, but it means uttering a lengthy incantation. The trouble is, it is only ever to be uttered or even heard by those entrusted with it – in other words – me not you. This is a magic decree of the highest order.

"Now – erm – perhaps if you were all to shout as loud as you can that word actors use to indicate hubbub and general conversation. Hopefully that will satisfy the decree while I perform the spell. But what on earth is that damned word. . . ?"

Although most of the gathering knew full well what the word was, there immediately followed sly winks and knowing smiles. With each one egging on the other, a verbal broadside made up of the names of many random fruits and vegetables and even the odd brand name, was fired at Professor Cornstone.

"I know! It's beetroot!"

"Don't be stupid! It's elderberry!"

"Elderberry my arse! It's pickled onions!" said Estella.

"Ha! Take no notice, professor, it's cauliflower!"

"Red cabbage!" "Granny Smiths!" "Baked Beans!"

"Rhubarb!" yelled Big Bill. "Oops," he added – quietly. Bill, now blushing and laughing at the same time, had unthinkingly said the right word.

The penny finally dropped. Professor Cornstone was going to fume and yell and jump up and down – but there simply wasn't time.

"On my command! . . . NOW!"

At first the oft-repeated word was audible – and loud:

"Rhubarb rhubarb! Rhubarb rhubarb! Rhubarb rhubarb! RHUBARB RHUBARB!"

In their enthusiasm, which was actually to their credit due to the

seriousness of flouting any decree ofthe magic laws of the cosmos, the Irregulars became louder and louder and the word became increasingly indistinct. Soon it had become one big garbled verbal mess.

"RHUBUBARBURUBUBURHBHBUBBUBBUB
RHUBUBARBURUBUBURHBHBUBBUBBUB
RHUBUBARBURUBUBURHBHBUBBUBBUBRHB
RHUBUBUBUBUBARBARHUBARBUB. . . "

"When you can spare a minute. . ." said Professor Cornstone.

The professor had finished more than a minute before, but he had wanted to get his own back and enjoy the sight of his fellow Irregulars looking and acting stupid – in his opinion. As for the Irregulars, they were actually having a rare old time. But calm soon returned and the professor once more bent over the frame. The first thing he did was to spin the fourth crystal anti-clockwise. He had to wait until it had stopped before proceeding further. This action established the link and made the journey possible through facilitating the crystals' time travelling qualities.

He carefully turned the first winder; this corresponded to the first crystal which began to revolve at high-speed. At the same time, a little cloud of yellow smoke rose above the frame. Surprisingly, this was not a pleasant, softly-shaded yellow mist, but the type of raspy, frazzy smoke commonly used in second-rate conjuring tricks, or as part of the special effects in early Hollywood sci-fi films such as Flash Gordon.

As Professor Cornstone continued to turn the winder, the smoke became denser and eventually it began to form a familiar shape.

Everyone gasped in wonder as they saw the yellow smoke form the figure two and just hover in the air.

Upon seeing the desired number, Professor Cornstone moved on to the next winder. This time a bright orange pall of smoke appeared, and eventually that became a zero. The third winder produced bright green smoke and the figure one, the last one was purple and this produced the figure seven. The Irregulars held their breath.

Nothing.

But Professor Cornstone was smiling.

"Fooled you all, eh?! The thing is, it won't be fully activated until I've set the month, day, and even time."

Although difficult to see, there were several more smaller handles near the bottom of the front of the frame. The professor began to turn these, and very soon the different coloured smoky mists began to spell out the months of the year, days of the week, and there was even a misty dartboard effect which was actually the twenty-four hour clock.

The professor stopped turning each of the winders at the required point.

The multi-coloured, chronological smoky display now showed the desired day and date and even their destination, but the professor had not yet set

the clock at the desired time for their return.

"As soon as I've completed this last function we'll be off. Don't worry, it's all dramatic stuff but harmless."

Professor Cornstone set the time for their arrival back at Krickenstaltz at 4:00 p.m., which was precisely the time they had left. "Stand firm, everyone!"

The whole tower shook and rumbled, causing the Irregulars to rock and sway and bump into each other, most were even a little afraid; but eventually everything settled and all was still once more. Their fears quickly faded – as did the Irregulars themselves. . .

The journey back to their own time was under way.

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"Merlin will pay for double crossing me!" yelled Mordred, bursting into the tower, still holding his side and with blood still flowing heavily from his shoulder. He had walked into a mini storm of soil and pebbles which were flying up and around the tower. He couldn't see a thing.

The soilstorm eventually settled and Mordred realised that Mike and his friends had gone, but the murderous knight was soon distracted from his angry vengeful thoughts.

"Er – excuse me, sorry to disturb you, but I was just on a ramble with my family. We stopped for a picnic and then — DEAR LORD! WHAT ON EARTH HAS HAPPENED TO YOU?!"

62

The Mobile Defence Unit

PROFESSOR WINCH AND PROFESSOR STANNICH THE ELDER were walking back along the corridor. This was after saying farewell to the Glastonbury task force.

Professor Winch stopped, smiled, and put his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Hold on, Ren, if Edwin is the stickler for orderliness I think he is, we may as well turn around and walk straight back."

"I'm not viz you, Gabriel, vot do you mean?"

"Come, my friend, all will become clear."

They walked back along the passageway to the oak door which Professor Winch opened.

Ren was bemused by his boss's strange behaviour, because all he expected to find was the stark, black, jaggedy rock-walled bare room which was rarely used. He was not at all sure as to Professor Winch's comments about Professor Cornstone's orderliness, but his friend and boss then offered an explanation.

"Despite the many bad things that can be said about Edwin, he has at least one commendable trait, and that is his penchant for order, especially in things concerning time. Crystals or no crystals, they left from here at 1600 hours, and – give or take a minute or two, they will return to here at 1600 hours."

Ren Stannich nodded – and blushed. He also should have known this.

No sooner had Professor Winch spoken, than a strange bluey-grey smoky mist formed at the far end of the bare room. Out of this mist several familiar figures began to appear.

The task force had left at precisely 4:00 p.m., and, give or take, not just a minute or two, but a few seconds, were back at 4:00 p.m. Although his face still showed a tinge of red, Ren managed a smile.

The mist cleared to reveal a rather grimy, mucky, bloody, muddy bunch of Irregulars. Some were showing signs of having been injured, but none bar Reverend Waldrom were in dire need of further medical assistance, magic or otherwise.

There was Edwin, holding the frame which secured the Time Crystals of Glastonbury. Next to the grim professor was Mike, nonchalantly swinging Excalibur as if it was Mrs Gripweed's shopping bag. These were surrounded by Josh, Ernst, Gregor, Big Bill, Agnes, Estella, Florence, Jez, Nathaniel and Jacinta, as well as the goodly vicar who was supported by the two titans.

"Well done, Mike, well done, my friends!" exclaimed a jubilant Professor Winch.

But instead of returning a cheery greeting, everyone just half smiled and half frowned. Ren Stannich was quick to realise why this was.

"Ver iz Marina and Laszlo?"

Surprisingly, it was Mike who was first to try and explain. "Professor, I'm – I'm very sorry, but Marina and Laszlo are de. . . "

But Mike was not able to finish his words and burst into tears. Rather surprisingly, he then buried his face in Professor Cornstone's arms. At the same time Estella had moved across to try and comfort her young friend, but backed off after witnessing this unusual occurrence. Estella gave an almost unnoticeable smile of satisfaction, as did most of the others. This was due to the odd but very welcome sight of the compassion being shown by one Professor Cornstone, who had turned, knelt and had embraced his young charge.

Ren Stannich exploded in fury at this terrible news.

"Vot?! 'Ow did ziss 'appen?! Boze ov zem?! Ziss iz terrible!" said a beside himself Ren, who did not need anyone to finish what Mike had been trying to say.

Professor Winch's countenance was that of grief and sorrow. He spoke very softly to the others.

"Alas, there is always a risk of death, and I fear there will be more tragedy before we overcome our enemies, but we do have the crystals and we must be thankful for that. I know it may not seem so right now, but I can assure you all that Marina and Laszlo have not died in vain.

"Now if you would, please, Edwin, leave the crystals here and please take Mike back to his room. And I take it your rather sleepy guest is our mysterious vicar, back to his kindly self, I hope. . . ? Big Bill, please take him to Professor Stannich's office and lay him down on the sofa. It might also be an idea to fetch Trixie to see if he needs further treatment, there's a good fellow. If he's up to it I'll have a chat with him later, but then I think it would be for the best if we get him an escort and whisk him off to the airport.

"As for the rest of you, please do avail yourselves of whatever the mess can rustle up for you, then do your best to get some sleep. Meet me back here at 2030 sharp."

Professor Winch again placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, for Ren's grief was also his. The two old friends walked out of the room and back up the passageway; they were off to the Council Chambers to update Septimus, Engelbert and the others on the latest developments.

To their great surprise and more than a little amusement, the tired and hungry Irregulars were soon to find that their leader was not quite up to the mark in absolutely everything.

Upon enquiring of the emergency kitchen and serving staff if they could "Spare a bite or two and scrounge a cuppa", the hungry and thirsty troops were met with amused and mystified faces.

But the comic awkwardness was soon brought to an end by none other than Ellen. She came rushing through from the small, rarely used kitchens of

Krickenstaltz, and jumped straight into Gregor's arms.

Ellen eventually but reluctantly broke away. The young chef and waitress explained to her friends that very shortly after the citadel had been put on high alert, the old Academy galley had been cleaned up and cleared out, and the main hall of Krickenstaltz declared a military mess for all ranks. This provisional mess was to remain open for anything from a quick snack to a full meal, 24 hours a day 7 days a week, until the current emergency was over.

After duly refreshing themselves, the scratch troops retired to their bunks in the hope of getting at least a little shut-eye.

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It was just on 2030 hours. The Council of War was once more in session. The Council itself, its delegates and members – whether full or ex officio, had quickly resumed proposing, discussing, arguing, honing and fine-tuning, rubber stamping, and finally putting their plans into operation. Such plans were of course concerned with the inevitable battle facing the good folks of Krickenstaltz.

The more usual defenders of the citadel were at their posts both on the battlements and around the Academy grounds. They were wondering why the enemy had not yet attacked and instead were just hovering in the air. Professor Winch knew why, and he knew exactly when they would attack. Thankfully this was not going to be just yet.

Although he had again reminded himself that absolute 100% certainty was just a pipe dream, Professor Winch neverthless felt confident enough that despite the ancient stronghold being surrounded by enemy forces far outnumbering their own, calm would prevail a little longer – but not that much longer.

Although The League of Mordred were infinitely more civilised than their more barbaric allies (although only by comparison with them), their history was still steeped in folklore. The League of Mordred were still witches and wizards and so were still part of the magic world, albeit an evil part. Such evil believed implicitly in the power of the moon, especially a full moon. The next full moon was due to be fully visible in eastern Europe at 9:00 p.m. that night.

Although the warlocks would happily fight a battle on the beaches of Guam straight after breakfast, they too believed in the evil omen of lunar totality. So – 9:00 p.m. it was going to be. This gave the latter day Davy Crockett and friends arising from their slumber, just over thirty minutes to prepare before defending their very own Alamo.

Professor Winch was back in the bare room beyond the oak door, accompanied once more by Ren Stannich. The elderly professor was of course still upset over the deaths of Marina and Laszlo. The two faithful retainers had not just been valued employees of the Academy, but two much-loved very dear friends. However, he knew he would have to grieve later and not now.

One by one, most of the Irregulars trooped in to the room. They gathered together in a tight little group and patiently waited for Professor Winch to give them their orders, however, Mike was not with them. This was because Professor Cornstone had been asked by his leader to leave Mike to rest a few minutes longer. He wanted a quiet word with the OIC of the Irregulars, concerning the young Valiant.

"Good, very good," said Professor Winch, looking round and offering them all a warm smile. "Now, as you have probably already guessed, very shortly we will be under attack by the enemy. Although the regular troops have been deployed as best we can, the truth is, we are still a little thin on the ground. As you know, I had initially decided to place most of you on the battlements to reinforce the groups of three we already have posted there, but I have changed my mind.

"There can be no doubt that the enemy will use their superior forces, at least in number, to press and look for weaknesses in our defence – they will find them too. So instead you will be a mobile defence unit, shoring up the defences wherever they have been breached, but you cannot tarry: in this situation you will be the sticking plaster not the surgeon, so to speak. Do you all understand this?"

There were nods and mumbles of agreement from most present. However, Professor Cornstone had been musing on something else.

"Erm – pardon me, Headmaster, but was our trip to Glastonbury really any use? We are about to fight a far superior force in numbers, and yet I believe that even if the crystals were given a huge boost of magic energy, it will still take weeks to train up the Magic Army."

Professor Winch nodded at both the logic and gravity of the question. He rubbed his chin and frowned before replying.

"Firstly, you are forgetting that regardless of whether we manage to reinstitute the Magic Army or not, we cannot have the crystals in enemy hands, that would be disastrous. As for the retraining period, Ren and I have been with the rest of the Council most of the day, and it was finally agreed that we can get this down to one day.

"However, I am pained to have to tell you that there are serious and immediate consequences to this, and I'm not sure if we can avoid long-term, irreparable damage. All non-essential annexes are in the process of being closed, and all other protective magic energy fields have been nullified. All energy saved through taking such drastic action will be diverted and used to strengthen the crystals even more than we had originally intended. They do of course have their own great inherent powers, but as odd as it seems, a different external power is needed to drive and utilise these.

"One highly regrettable consequence of this already, is that Hemlock Hall, just like Krickenstaltz, is now fully visible to the non-magic community. Not only this, but most civilian and military magic areas and institutions have been evacuated and de-magimoleculised, or soon will be. Hopefully everything can be reinstituted later, but it isn't certain.

"All citizens of the magic community have been advised to blend in with ordinary folks wherever they can, especially when travelling. Now, any questions before we move on?"

"There is one thing I would like to ask, Professor. If the Magic Army still need training up or retrained or whatever, where on earth are you going to be able to do that?" asked Estella.

"Zorry, my volt, I did zort you vud know. It iz Zornton, zumver near Liverpoolenzstaltz," interjected Professor Stannich, although he did not know he had interjected due to it being perfectly normal to answer all such questions, seeing as he was the current commander of this mysterious magic fighting force.

Most of the Irregulars gave knowing smiles. If they had to guess where anything unusual would and could take place, their guess would surely be the small town of Thornton near Liverpool, which had become so familiar to most of our Irregulars.

"Thank you, Professor," said Estella with a smile. The fun-loving Irregular was amazed that her own sleepy little home town was figuring so greatly in their endeavours.

"Well – time is cracking on, everyone, but please wait a few moments in here if you would, I need a word in private with Edwin," said Professor Winch.

The two went out into the corridor, and Professor Winch spoke to Edwin in a whisper.

"I still don't know what else Arthur is expecting Mike to do, but I'm still not taking any chances. He will still have to have Excalibur with him always, but he must still be protected at all times. Is that understood?"

"I understand, Professor. I will ask the two big fellas and Ernst and Josh to keep him covered from the moment we join the battle," replied Edwin.

"Good, good. And now I think it is time to fetch the young Valiant and bring him back down here."

A few minutes later, a white-faced Mike rejoined his friends. It was thirty seconds before 9:00 p.m.

"Please make your way to the battlements, everyone, zero hour is here! May God and King Arthur be with us all this night," said a grim sounding Professor Winch.

The Irregulars, led by the valiant but heavily protected Mike Miller, walked down the passageway and on towards a little wooden flight of steps with a little door at the top. Professor Cornstone gestured for Big Bill Dooley to slyly overtake Mike and be the first one through. As he did so, Krickenstaltz was rocked by an almighty explosion. It was a warlock triple death-bolt, which, if not finding a human target, could just as easily be a powerful piece of artillery fire. A huge section of the roof was ripped right off. Big pieces of rock, masonry, tiling, glass, and a variety of other mangled and shredded building materials collapsed in a heap, just to the left of the little doorway.

"Hurry along, now!" yelled Professor Cornstone.

As the new Mobile Defence Unit walked out on to the battlements, the whole of Krickenstaltz was engulfed in a mass of noise, smoke, dust, explosions and dazzlingly bright lights of every colour.

Although the first death-bolt had taken the entire company by surprise, the defenders of the citadel soon shifted into gear. This included the newly recruited numerous magic trios. These began rapidly instigating the special Defence spells they had been taught only hours previously.

Supersonic booms and a veritable multi-coloured laser-light show heralded an incredible barrage of wand-fire. This had been orchestrated by none other than the usually meek and mild Engelbert Osbaldeston, and was for the purpose of covering fire for the many wand-bearing trios.

The groups of three quickly spaced themselves out evenly along the battlements on the front and sides of the fortress, as well as on the roof to the rear of Krickenstaltz, which was at one with the sheer face of the mountainside.

Each member of each trio then faced each other to form what appeared to be a rough circle, but as we know, appearances can be deceptive, there was nothing rough or ready about it in the least. With the aid of remote incantations from the Elders of Krickenstaltz, each group were able to adopt pin-point precision spacing in relation to the spells they were about to perform.

All of the wizards and witches making up the trios raised their wands up and out very slightly, and very soon each wand was positioned at precisely a five degree angle. The formation of each trio now suggested the shape of a human 3D triangle or perhaps a pyramid. This was to ensure that each wand was pointing diagonally up at the sky, but in such a way that the spells they were about to perform would work in conjunction with one another.

After the order had been given loud and clear from the roof-top of Krickenstaltz by Professor Winch, each trio commenced uttering their especially formulated incantations.

What followed was something truly staggering.

From one of the wands from each group, a stream of blue fluorescent light shot out and raced up high into the sky. These were quickly followed by purple then yellow streams from all of the other wands.

With a huge boom, the different coloured streams from their own trios met and combined at a point in the Heavens, way, way above Krickenstaltz. From the tips of each of these came triple-powered tricoloeuric pulses. These arced right across the sky, meeting bang in the centre directly above the citadel.

Once the pulses had fully connected, many others branched out from and to many random points along the original streams, to form what most people would describe as a gigantic spider's web.

There came a second boom, even louder than the first.

As the last echo of the booms faded away, a huge sheet of reddy/orange light appeared out of nowhere, and began to rapidly fill out the gaps between the streams. The magical web twisted and shifted in the sky and rapidly

expanded out and down. Soon the web had covered the whole of the sky immediately above Krickenstaltz and had arched right down to the ground, totally encasing the citadel and its immediate surrounds.

The benefits of such intense magic soon became obvious to the defenders. From the moment the process was complete, the potentially deadly magic firepower of the enemy began to simply bounce back off the protective shield. Although most of these magic missiles were deflected, some ended up as being direct hits back on those who had fired them, taking out quite a few of their number.

As the Mobile Defence Unit made their way along the inner edge of the lower battlements, Mike could hear the same spell repeated again and again. He could see many groups of three all holding their wands up in the air, forming pyramid shapes. These were the creative source of the magical dome protecting the ancient fortress.

The newly formed stopgappers paused at the corner of the front wall and west wing of the citadel. They were momentarily redundant, but Professor Cornstone was keeping a close eye on things as he knew that there would be a breach sooner or later. So did Mike, who had realised that it was the high-speed but still separate streams of light which made it seem as if the huge, protective magic mantle was constant, a little like cinematic film. In reality, it was the repetition of the spells combined with ever-outstretched arms which kept the magic pulses shooting into the sky, but one aching wrist or tired arm would soon lessen its effectiveness.

Courtesy of the magic powers of the Council, the defenders had the advantage of being able to fire through the protective shield, resulting in their achieving considerable early success. In the opening exchanges, a great many warlocks had suffered direct hits and had fallen.

The League of Mordred, as Professor Winch knew they would, simply hovered above and to the rear of Krickenstaltz. As instructed by Zenith they were deliberately letting their allies take an early battering.

Zenith, although evil was not stupid. He respected Professor Winch and the WFW as adversaries, despite obvious personal animosities. He knew that their initial defence would be solid, but he also knew it could not be maintained.

Zenith smiled as he witnessed the first crack in the WFW's armour.

The courageous but very battle-weary Jack Robinson simply couldn't help it. Despite one last muscle-bursting effort, he just couldn't hold on any longer and dropped his wand-arm, immediately causing a break in the protective shield.

Zenith gave his men the order to fire but not to advance. His evil ally Zezk also saw the opportunity to fire upon the defenders and stem the flow of early losses. He yelled at his men not only to fire more rapidly but to begin the advance.

Death-bolts were fired at Jack's little trio. His two friends fell down dead while Jack was hit in the shoulder. Any thoughts he had concerning such

things as thanking his lucky stars were banished from his mind in an instant. Jack was then hit full in the head with a dreaded trepannerblast. It wasn't long before every childhood monster, ghost, vampire, rabid dog, and every phobia in existence was at him, all around him and inside his head. He dropped his wand, put his hands to his ears and started to scream. He staggered and crashed right into the wall at the front of the battlements, and with the total immobility caused by such dread fear, he stumbled right over the parapet and plummeted down to earth.

A warlock tracked his fall from the battlements: he aimed, fired, and hit the brave private with repeated death-bolts. Jack was dead before he hit the ground.

Mike saw that the defences had been breached. "Come on! We'll have to take over!"

But he was held back by Professor Cornstone. "That's not our job, Mike, watch."

They looked up to see three soldiers race out onto the battlements to urgently reinstigate the magic trio.

"The top brass aren't daft, lad, there are some reinforcements for up here. I think our job is to be found within the grounds," explained the professor.

"Yes, sorry, I didn't know."

"And who says you should have known? But still, you know now, eh?"

Mike managed a little smile, nodded, and again followed Professor Cornstone. He was surprised to find Big Bill Dooley and Jez seemingly muscling in to get past. Tucked in uncomfortably close behind were Josh and Ernst. "Blinkin' 'eck! You lot are eager!"

"Yeah, that's it Mike. Eager's we is," said Jez.

They made their way to the stone staircase at the far side of the citadel above the stables. They climbed down and soon found themselves in the grounds, only yards away from a group of impalas with their temporary passengers. They heard a scream from up above: yet another defender fell to his death and yet again the shield was breached. In an instant, a troop of warlocks streamed in through the huge gash in the steel fence on the right side of the citadel. They had been told to attack the impalas from behind, but they had not seen the Mobile Defence Unit.

Professor Cornstone had to quickly weigh up their options: to run out and mount a full-on attack, or to take them on with stealth. Due to the sudden display of flashing lights overhead caused by the reinstigating of the magic shield, they could all now be seen as clear as day by the invaders. The Professor made a snap decision.

"Now – Mike! The rest of you! — UP AND AT 'EM!"

Mike did not have time to think or be scared. He advanced on the leading warlock who was about to fire off a death-bolt, but before he could, the evil warrior soon found himself on the wrong end of Excalibur, at least from his point of view.

The Mobile Defence Unit soon found themselves battling warlock after

warlock. Hundreds more poured in through the huge gap in the fence, immediately replacing their fallen comrades.

Similar to on the roof of the caravan in Thornton, the Irregulars had strategically placed themselves and their battle-wands to be of maximum and ruthless efficiency. Not one single warlock managed to hit any of the defenders with any of their range of deadly magic missiles, and had no chance at all of releasing the cataclysmic trepannerblasts.

Mike occasionally thrust Excalibur at the enemy, but mostly he was able to utilise its magical strength to deflect many death-bolts, spears, lances and more away from his friends. Although King Arthur would no doubt have disapproved, Mike managed a wry smile as he repeatedly used the ancient and truly magnificent sword like a cricket bat.

As for the warlocks with non-throwing traditional weapons, who simply had to be there for them to have any chance of being effective, they very soon wished they had been spear throwers instead – those left alive that is.

The MDU successfully defended its turf for over an hour, beating off relentless attacks as more and more warlocks poured through the breach in the fence. This had sadly become possible due to many of the human pyramids having been overcome by exhaustion.

But gradually it became more like the battle on Glastonbury Tor. As ruthlessly efficient as they were, the Irregulars were also beginning to tire. Big Bill Dooley sensed this and immediately ran from the group to face eighteen warlocks head on. He rolled and fired to perfection, bringing seventeen of them down. Bill then found himself only inches away from the sharp end of a warlock's sword. As the warlock went in for the killer blow, he suddenly arched, gasped, and fell down dead.

Mike looked shocked as he withdrew Excalibur.

"Fanks, me ole mucker. I know it's terrible, lad, but it was 'im or us,' said Big Bill Dooley as he patted his saviour on the shoulder.

"I know, I know," said Mike resignedly, but still with a shameful look on his face.

Sadly for the defenders of Krickenstaltz, the all-encasing protective shield was now no more. Luckily for the WFW, the number of warlocks piling in through the torn fence had just as quickly dwindled as it had increased – there simply weren't any warlocks left outside to pile in anywhere. At least not on that side of the citadel.

The defenders were finally able to take a quick breather. As they looked around the grounds, they were heartened by what seemed to be success after success for the defenders of Krickenstaltz.

Next came three great blasts on a horn from the battlements. Neither Mike nor his friends knew quite what it meant at first, but it became clear soon enough. It was a signal for the defenders to become attackers. Although the impalas and their temporary riders had been inching slowly forward, it had still been more of a defensive action, but not now.

The impalas, with their riders barely hanging on, rushed forward in a

massive stampede. Some kept their heads low, some straight ahead, while others looked up. This was to ensure that their own death-bolts shooting out from their magic antlers covered as much space as possible. This, combined with the more freer moves of the riders, many of whom had warlock-like flails and bludgeons, made them a very deadly force indeed as they swept forward and into the warlocks' lines.

At the same time, hundreds of troops were taking off from the battlements on their broomsticks, racing to engage the enemy in deadly combat in the sky. These very welcome reinforcements had been urgently ordered to the defence of the magic citadel, by Field Marshall Brad Kowalski, Commander of the American Delegation.

Mike was mystified as to why things seemed so easy. He was soon to find out why. One of the airborne troops flew off from the battle formation and signalled to the Irregulars that he needed to speak with them. He stopped nearby, hovered a few feet in the air, and looked down. He studied each of the MDU in turn until he espied the person he had a message for.

"Are you Professor Cornstone?"

The very puzzled Professor looked at the soldier and just nodded.

"Bring your unit back inside, please, quick as you can. Boss's orders."

The whole crew were equally puzzled.

"But why? What is going on?" asked Professor Cornstone.

The soldier thought for a moment, seemed to glance up and behind the Academy, but then stuck to his original orders. "You'll soon find out. Now hurry!"

As they made their way up the side steps and back up to the battlements, Mike was curious. He too looked up to the rear of Krickenstaltz, and gasped.

"They're gone! The League of Mordred are gone!" Mike shouted in astonishment.

Everyone looked up to find that not one single member of The League of Mordred was left hovering above the Academy.

As the mystified Irregulars made their way along the top of the battlements to the little doorway at the end, they studied the developments down below and up and around the Krickenstaltz Academy.

The noise, the flashing lights, the shouting and even blood-curdling screams were tremendous. The full scale battle going on around the grounds had caused a swirling pall of dust to rise up, surrounding both friend and enemy. The impalas and riders swept round and around the outer rim of the grounds like a demented circus parade. Demented maybe, but deadly. They fired ahead, to their sides, up above, and in every direction in between. Hundreds more warlocks had fallen where they stood, their array of battle weapons, both magic and ordinary – useless. But the enemy fought on, hoping their greater number would still tell in the end.

Vlad was at the head of his brave army, deftly using his antlers to not only fire at the enemy, but to deflect any incoming death-bolts away from either his own herd or their riders. The brave Imapalese king was even hit seven

times, but luckily none of the magic missiles were life threatening. Vlad's clever evasion manoeuvres resulted in them just scraping along his thick hide at an angle.

The ploy of matching up the Impalese army with cavalry troops was proving to be an astounding success. If a warlock wasn't stopped in his tracks by a defender's death-bolt, he was very soon on the wrong and highly lethal end of a flail or a bludgeon. Although indeed gruesome, many of the warlocks' ground forces met their death in the solid, rapidly advancing stampede of the impalas and riders.

The aerial battle was being won by the defenders as well, with the airborne WSS taking on the warlocks head to head, forcing them further and further back.

Tragically, the defenders had also incurred some losses.

From among the valiant keepers of the 3D pyramids, eleven of its little trios had been wiped out — thirty three brave young men and women of whom more than half were civilians — gone in an instant. If the MDU had known of this and had had time to muse on it, the words "That could have been me" or even "That should have been me", would surely have loomed large in their minds. However, as their own concerns had placed them in amongst the noise, light and dust of battle, this meant they had been spared this anguish.

Nine impalas had been hacked to death after the warlocks had screamed in anger at the failure of their magic weaponry, resorting to using every variation of razor sharp or deadly blunt mediaeval arms to take their pointless and short-lived revenge.

As well as the tragic losses of many of the brave keepers of the protective shield, thirty-one fighting men had been killed in the midst of the main battle: twenty-five from death-bolts and six from trepannerblasts. Twenty-two of these had fallen from an impala, and were either already dead or had been trepannerblasted out of their minds, with the remainder having been forced off their broomsticks in close-to airborne hand to hand fighting. Many more WFW troops had been injured, some very badly, but the warlocks' losses had been and were continuing to be very heavy indeed.

From about half a mile away just above the canopy of the forest, Zezk surveyed the rout of his evil army with both fear and dismay. Seconds after this, Zezk was a mile away – then five miles – then ten miles. His men battled on, not yet realising that their leader had deserted them.

The Mobile Defence Unit climbed back in through the skylight door. An elderly member of the Council not known to any of them was standing waiting for them. He had his arms folded and he looked worried.

"This way, all of you if you please. Hurry now!"

They left the battle scene where the demoralised warlocks – without their evil allies The League of Mordred, were being rapidly pushed back both on the ground and in the air. Although the noise, the booms and the flashes of light made it look as if the opposing forces were evenly matched – the reality

was very different. The warlocks were as good as beaten.

The Irregulars trooped after the old wizard and soon found themselves in the War Room of the Council Chambers. Professor Winch, along with Septimus, Engelbert and the others, were all seated around the large table.

"Good, good. Sit yourselves down, make yourselves comfortable, but not too comfortable. I have some rather disturbing news for you all, although you may have guessed something of this already."

"Is it the disappearance of Zenith and his men, Headmaster?" asked Professor Cornstone.

"It is indeed, Edwin, it is indeed. What is more worrying is that I know why they have disappeared, and equally I know exactly where they will reappear. I'm sorry to have to tell you all this, but Zenith and his men are currently en route to Hemlock Hall."

There were gasps of astonishment from the Irregulars upon hearing this news. Mike shot out of his seat.

"Hemlock Hall?! This is terrible! What about all my friends?! They'll be killed! You've got to do something. This is terr—"

"Mike, please calm yourself! All is not lost! Please, Mike, sit down and let me continue."

Estella, politely waving both Josh and Ernst away, stood and went over to Mike. She whispered some reassurance and gently coaxed him to sit down again, allowing Professor Winch to continue.

"My friends, as you know, warfare is a very fluid situation. . . "

Upon hearing the word fluid, Nathaniel Morse immediately gave his wife a guilty look and blushed, but he forced himself back to the rather grim here and now.

" . . . and this means that we simply cannot make plans in advance to enable us to deal with every possible contingency. We plan – things change – we then amend our plans, or go to Plan B, to use the common parlance. This is the true nature of warfare.

"More pertinently and more specifically, in the light of this sudden dire threat to Hemlock Hall, I have come to a very grave decision regarding its defence. . . "

In deathly silence, and with the Irregulars hanging on his every word (and with Mike and some of the others fearing the school was not going to be defended at all), Professor Winch went on to explain in detail, just how fluid things really were.

63

A Secret Mission for the Morse Brothers

PROFESSOR WINCH LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM: his captive audience were impatient and fearful of what they were about to hear.

"Let me take you back to when I had to ask Ted and Franky to leave John Michael's establishment. The thing is, I had been left with no other option but to. . . "

With the details gleaned from a recent account from the boys themselves, the Irregulars sat and listened to how the Morse brothers had aided the powers of good. This was after they had seemingly been sent home in disgrace.

*

Ted and Franky had continued to frown and grimace as they were still in sight of the Irregulars ensconced in the lounge of the Avalon Arms – assuming that it was possible to actually see out of the heavily barred and dust covered single window.

After walking thirty yards or so back up Glastonbury High Street, they turned to each other and smiled.

"The things we do for Professor Winch!" joked Ted.

"Yeah, I know, but he did say it was necessary, and it is fun all this cloak and dagger stuff, and even pretending we were upset when Professor Cornstone wouldn't let us answer the question about King Richard!" said Franky.

"Er — yeah. . . " said Ted, with more than a little uncertainty and again with a frown on his face.

"Come on, let's stop dawdling and get to it!" said his knowing and secretly amused brother. They started walking at speed and eventually came to the doorway into the Tor.

Once inside, Ted took out a map of the secret tunnels and doors under the magic community's control, and he and Franky studied it until they knew where they were going, which was not back to Krickenstaltz but to Hemlock Hall.

"We'd better get this right, Ted, if we don't, lord knows where we'll end up. This is the last authorised journey within the Tor for who knows how long."

"If we do mess up it will be Professor Winch's fault, he gave us the map."

"You know Professor Winch, he'll say we read it wrong, wink at us, provide a huge feast and hope we'd forget all about it!"

"Providing we get rescued from – er. . . "

"Tierra Del Fuego?" suggested Franky.

"Or Cleethorpes, even," replied Ted.

"I don't pay you two good money to stand around discussing my foibles when you have an urgent job to do!" said Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph.

"You don't pay us any money!" joked Ted.

"Pardon? Bad line this!" said Professor Winch. "Enough chit-chat! Get to it!"

Both gave their agreement to this and commenced their journey along the path that would lead them to Hemlock Hall, eventually.

The two young men would not be transmuting. In the interests of security they had been advised to make their journey by other means, the more unlikely the better. Instead, they were to utilise three widescreen televisions to make a two-legged journey to their destination. This of course meant they would be Telly-Porting.

The television they would be using for their immediate departure was hidden away somewhere within Glastonbury Tor. Hemlock Hall's magic TV, is, as we know, situated in the Main Hall when in use.

Unfortunately for Ted and Franky, the remaining widescreen television which was to be used for both arrival and departure at the interim point of their journey, just happened to be in a house on the Fylde Coast in the northwest of England. The house belonged to one Professor Barnabus J Mudthrupple.

The room with the magic departure point was deep within the Tor and was deliberately sited well away from inquisitive eyes and ears, of which there are many to be found in Glastonbury all year round. And there would no doubt be a few unwelcome enquiries from more sinister members of the magic fraternity, should they ever unwittingly come across the magic television.

Ted and Franky made one last right turn to see a perfectly ordinary looking door at the end of the path.

"This is it, I hope," said Franky.

"Tierra Del Fuego here we come!" joked Ted.

"Ah, autumn in Cleethorpes! Bracing!" retorted Frank.

Ted opened the door and stepped in, quickly followed by his brother. They found themselves in a small, dark, oblong room. There was no furniture and the walls were equally bare as well as damp. The room was also smelly.

It wasn't too dissimilar to the bare room behind the sixth oak door at Krickenstaltz, but it did differ in two significant ways. The walls were not hewn out of jagged black rock, but instead were made of centuries old bricks. The other difference was their means of departure, the widescreen TV. They had found the right room, thus dispelling any fears of a prolonged absence, either in remote Patagonia, or in a particularly cold, dismal resort town on the east coast of England.

Franky twiddled the first dial to find the Travel Channel, and the second to

tune it to Barney Mudthrupple's abode.

"Ready?" asked Franky. "Ready," replied Ted.

They stepped up and into the TV screen and climbed down into Barney's front room.

There to greet them was Mrs Pollett's sister, Angelica Thorpe. This good lady filled in for Agnes on certain occasions. She was also Leo's grandmother. Mrs Thorpe was banking on it being a quick turnaround. This was in the hope that Barney would never know that the Morse brothers had ever been in his house at all.

"Hello, boys!" smiled Angelica. "I wish you could stop long enough for me to make you something, but it's best if you crack straight on. Barney has gone for his weekly game of bridge next door, but he's due back soon."

"No problem, Mrs T. From what I've heard, I think it's the worst thing we could do," said Franky.

"Didn't he promise to skin Winchy – er – Professor Winch alive, when he was here recently?" asked Ted.

Mrs Thorpe frowned. Like her sister, she had known Barney for many years, she even called him worse names behind his back than Agnes ever did. The truth was, she was very fond of the old man and would do anything to help him, especially in recent times as Barney's health had worsened.

Mrs Thorpe took Barney's curmudgeonly ways as being the result of frustration, brought on perhaps through no longer being able to work the long hours customary for a potions specialist. Whatever time the old man could devote to his lifelong vocation was spent working at home, as Barney could not stand being gawped at by people who thought he was Professor Winch's twin brother, or even Professor Winch himself.

There may also have been an issue with stubborn pride. In all the years of Barney's self-imposed isolation, he had never been able to fix his doppelgangruous problem by himself.

"Yes, well, the less said about that the better. Come on then, straighten yourselves out and off you pop. Chop chop!"

It was time for the second leg of their broken journey. Franky made the adjustments on Barney's TV, both boys stepped up – and banged their heads on the solid TV screen.

"Ow! What the—!" yelled Ted in more than a bit of pain.

"JUST AS I THOUGHT!" shouted a sneering Barney Mudthrupple, who had just walked into the lounge.

Ted and Franky just stood there, rubbing their heads and wondering why they were not back at Hemlock Hall. What's more, Barney was rapidly advancing on them with a poker.

With an unspoken sibling understanding, Ted and Franky jumped down and raced around the room. Ted ran around to the right while Franky ran to the left. They were hoping to avoid Barney and of course the poker, and after sufficiently dizzying and confusing the old codger, make their bid for freedom.

But Barney had locked the middle door through expecting such a ploy, so neither could escape into the hall and out of the front door.

Barney just stood in the middle, swinging the poker wildly in all directions as the two brothers ran around the sides of the room trying to avoid getting whacked. Even Mrs Thorpe couldn't get anywhere near Barney to make him stop, and very nearly got hit herself.

But Barney soon tired and began to breathe deeply and splutter and groan. He dropped the poker and was just about to collapse on the floor, but Mrs Thorpe managed to catch him just in time. Ted and Franky, although reluctantly at first, helped her to lay the old man down on the couch.

"Really, Mr M, and after what the apothecary told you last week. You musn't upset yourself," said Mrs Thorpe.

Barney Mudthrupple coughed and wheezed, with his normally rosy red cheeks turning to a deathly shade of grey. "What do you expect?! Just to smile and say, 'Never mind, Winchy old pal, I don't mind being stuck with your ugly mug, you're welcome any time?!' Well he ain't! And neither are any of his cronies! That Creek had a damned nerve 'n' all, forcing his way in here just because ole crater-face got sozzled! And don't think I don't know all about Zenith being after his hide again! It's only whenever there's trouble he's seen up here! Ha! I knew he'd be back to try this, so I replaced the tuning crystal with a light bulb! Ha! That'll teach him! (He now looked directly at the two boys). That'll teach the lot of yer!"

Barney showed yet again that to him, Professor Winch and his cronies were indivisible. But with Barney once more going into a fit of coughing and wheezing, his worried carer dashed off to the kitchen to fetch him his prescribed potion.

Ted and Franky felt awkward and embarrassed. They could do nothing but look down on the tired and ailing old man. Eventually, Franky plucked up the courage to speak.

"Erm – Mr Mudthrupple, I'm sorry to bother you, but we are on a very urgent errand for Professor Winch. We must have the real crystal to get on our way."

"Never! Never! D' ya hear?! NEVER! And it's Professor Mudthrupple to you!" The ailing professor again resumed his bout of coughing and spluttering. It was so bad that Ted and Franky thought he was going to die right there and then.

Mrs Thorpe ran back into the room with his sedating potion.

"Here you are, Mr M, drink this, you'll soon feel better," said Mrs Thorpe, gently lifting up the old man's head.

No sooner had Barney Mudthrupple took a sip of the potion, than he was back at Lesterjester University where he had just sent every single opponent down into the mud to win a crucial Empires match for Camelot.

"Hmmm – he'll be out for hours, thank the Lord. I mixed his potion up with a blast of FDP, it'll give me time to find where he's put the real crystal. I think I've an idea where to find it, so I'll make you lads a cup of coffee and

some sandwiches. You can't go anywhere just at the moment, so you may as well stay awhile and tuck in."

"I suppose you're right," said Ted, "thanks."

"Yeah, ta, Angie," said Franky, for which he received a disapproving frown from the old fashioned Mrs Thorpe. The housekeeper-cum-carer bade the brothers to sit down and make themselves comfortable while she rustled up the refreshments.

It seemed no time at all before Ted and Franky were chomping on huge cheese salad sandwiches and slurping on mugs of especially imported extra-rich Atlantean coffee. This was at the same time as talking in very thick voices about what they had just witnessed.

Mrs Thorpe left them to talk with their mouths full while she commenced her systematic check of the house, beginning in the kitchen.

The old lady concluded that as the aged and infirm Barney couldn't bend down very well, the crystal was most probably in one of the tins on the shelf which Barney could reach easily. Angelica checked every single tin but did not find the crystal. She checked every item of crockery and even every pan – nothing. In her desperation she checked every packet of everything there was in the kitchen, still nothing. She checked in the fridge, oven, microwave, all of the cupboards – high or low, and even the washing machine, all without success.

There were only three things left in the kitchen to check: the tea caddy, the coffee jar and the sugar jar. Mrs Thorpe had left these until last, as she used these so often she had dismissed them as being too obvious a place to hide anything.

The tea caddy – nothing but tea bags. The coffee jar – full. The sugar jar was also full. She replaced the lids and walked to the kitchen door.

But before resigning herself to moving on to the rest of the house, the old lady then had a terrible thought. The coffee jar had been almost empty yesterday, and she had not bought any coffee since. . .

'No! He wouldn't! Oh no!'

Mrs Thorpe went back to the coffee jar, wrenched the lid off and looked down into it. She shook it and smelled it, gave a quizzical look, then a very worried look, smelled it again – and let out a scream.

"Aaargh, it's in the coffee! Boys, boys! Don't touch your drinks!"

Mrs Thorpe ran back into the lounge. There she found both Ted and Franky standing there with inane grins on their faces, singing, '*In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia*', a song made famous by the comic duo Laurel and Hardy, or perhaps it was more their classic routine when singing it which millions of fans still recall with great fondness.

Every so often throughout the brothers' own take on the song, Ted would twiddle and roll up his non-existent tie, while Franky would scratch his head and ruffle his hair.

Once was not enough.

At the end of one rendition, Ted turned to Franky, saying, "That's another

fine mess you've gotten us into!"

In response, Franky pulled an even sillier face, burst into tears, ruffled his hair once more, and gave a garbled explanation of some unknown transgression while pathetically pointing in all directions.

They burst into song yet again.

This time, Ted lifted the vent of his imaginary tuxedo with one hand, linked Franky with the other, and they both danced round and around the room.

One yodelled away in a high pitch voice while the other added a bass accompaniment.

Despite Angelica Thorpe knowing of the urgency of the boys' errand, and even with her grandson Leo in dire danger at Hemlock Hall, she collapsed over the edge of the couch, splitting her sides laughing.

Mrs Thorpe eventually regained control of her mirthful alter ego and set-to in putting together a fixative potion. What had happened to Ted and Franky was that they had unknowingly drank a coffee and tuning crystal infusion.

Tuning crystals are made out of a magic element called carobladyte. It is perfectly harmless when kept away from the only known substance which can dissolve it, or more accurately, the only organic thing which the crystal can assimilate – coffee. However, when added to coffee it is then impossible to see, but it does have a very faint odour which can be detected with care and if smelled close-to. Although often missed, another clue is the sudden seeming increase in volume of its host, due to assimilation.

A whole crystal when ingested can be fatal, but Mrs Thorpe simply could not believe that old Barney could murder anyone. However, her fears rapidly eased when a deeper poke around the coffee jar produced the rest of the used crystal.

What was curious was the fact that Barney did occasionally Telly-Port, but only to an equally aged cousin who never left his house at all but who still needed the requisite widescreen TV to receive visitors.

Thankfully, after a quick shufti in the sugar jar, seemingly filled to the brim, Mrs Thorpe pulled out a brand new carobladyte crystal. She remembered she hadn't bought any sugar recently either. . .

It was most unfortunate for Ted and Franky that the latently sardonic and perhaps even psychotic Professor Mudthrupple had not simply prevented the using of his TV and house as a magic staging post; but that was not Barney Mudthrupple's way.

Although Mrs Thorpe's fears about Barney willing to become a murderer for the sake of revenge were (hopefully) unfounded, the old man still felt very deeply aggrieved. So much so, that after the recent stormy meeting with his old friend, or rather ex-friend, Barney swore an oath that if Professor Winch, or indeed 'any of that mob' ever had the nerve to try and disrupt his quiet life again, he wanted to know about it . . . and perhaps hit them several times with a poker.

Knowing that things were afoot and that his TV may yet again be pressed into the service of the WFW, Barney had facilitated the possibility of such a

potential thrashing by taking out the carobladyte crystal from the back of the TV. This would not prevent any inward-bound passengers but would totally prevent any such interlopers from becoming outward-bound escapees.

As for the episode with the crystal coffee liqueur, the old professor would later tell his enthralled guests or partners at his bridge games, that he thought of this as having been an added but unexpected bonus.

However, the brothers had taken in only a very small dose and this simply produces comic results. Whenever it is ingested in this manner it becomes a potion known as Hero-Herb, or HH. Long before its properties in magic travel were discovered, it was used by entertainers from within the magic community to make their stage victims become like their lifelong heroes, a bit like stage hypnotism.

As both Ted and Franky considered themselves to be the number one fans of the late, great, comic actors Laurel and Hardy, it was no surprise to find them re-enacting scenes from their greatest film, '*Way Out West*'.

Time was cracking on. Mrs Thorpe was glad that she was busy in the kitchen preparing the potion, because Ted and Franky had just reached the funniest part of their tribute of sorts.

As per the scene in the film, Ted 'Hardy' was annoyed at being upstaged by his brother, Franky 'Laurel', who was happily belting out the chorus in a deep bass voice. But Franky suddenly became a soprano after getting hit on the head with the poker, thus unintentionally upstaging Ted even more.

Mrs Thorpe chuckled away at the very thought, and had some difficulty concentrating on the task in hand. The old lady finally gathered her wits about her and rushed back into the lounge to administer the fixative. She knew that asking them to break off from their mad routine so as to drink the potion would not even be heard. This was because the two were both still many miles and many years away from reality. She dipped a wand into the cup containing the potion and pointed it at Ted and Franky.

'HEROPOLOUS NOMOREUM SUSPENDIUM!'

Ted and Franky stopped dead in their tracks. They gave each other funny looks, quickly unlinked each other and turned round to face Mrs Thorpe. The looks of shock and amazement on their faces were somewhat tempered by both of them also blushing profusely.

"What on earth was all that about? I really thought I was Oliver Hardy!" exclaimed Ted.

"And I was Stan Laurel!" added Franky.

"Yes, and very good it was too, but you drank coffee mixed with a few shavings of carobladyte, which then makes it Hero-Herb. That's why you both became your heroes," said a still chuckling Angelica.

"Ah, yes, good old HH, Dad told me all about that, said he became Isambard Kingdom Brunel for a day," said Franky.

"Yes, I remember now!" exclaimed Ted. "That's why that whacking great

bridge was in our garden. It stretched across half the county!"

"Yeah, but that's not the best bit. Mum went absolutely crac—"

"Boys! Boys! This is no time to reminisce on your father's amazing engineering feats, you must get going!"

"Blinkin' 'eck! You're right! Come on!" said Ted.

Franky took the new crystal from Mrs Thorpe, placed it in a slot at the back of the television, and quickly twiddled the dials until the Main Hall at school was on the screen.

"Bye, Mrs Thorpe! And thanks!"

" . . . And where on earth have you been?!"

It was Professor Ezekiel Creek. He had been pacing up and down in front of the TV in the Main Hall. Ted and Franky quickly stepped out and began to explain the reasons for their delay, but they had to do so on the hoof. This was because Ezekiel, as he had done with the children on their Blackpool night out, swept along at speed until they arrived at Professor Winch's office. He used this whenever he stood in for the headmaster. His mood softened as he sat down behind the desk, beckoning Ted and Franky to be seated also.

" . . . So she gave you HH?! And you became Laurel and Hardy?! Well, that explains it. It's been done before of course. I was Henry the Eighth for a day once. Gabriel – er – the headmaster, had a terrible job to try and stop me beheading the good ladies of the village! So – why have you been sent back here so suddenly? Professor Winch seemed reluctant to explain everything, said it's best if I hear it all from you two."

Ted and Franky both came back down to earth. The brothers went on to explain to the professor that they were soon to face their old enemy as well as his entire army. However, that was not all they told him. . .

Ezekiel was white with shock after hearing such dreadful news.

But as for his friends and colleagues, they were yet to hear all that Professor Creek now knew, as Professor Winch had not yet got to this last worrying titbit during his relating of the Morse brothers' errand.

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" . . . Why couldn't you tell us of this earlier, Headmaster?" asked a very confused Jacinta Morse.

"Because, my dear, I needed to be absolutely certain that the boys' return to Hemlock Hall was absolutely top secret. I could not be certain that there would not have been enemy spies in any of the places you have been to recently. I had not long been informed that Hector Jibb had escaped, which is a surprise and a great disappointment to me, so I just could not and cannot take any further chances."

"I understand, Headmaster, sorry for doubting you," said Jacinta.

"No need to apologise, my dear, absolutely no need at all," replied Professor Winch.

"But why have they gone there at all, Headmaster?" asked Estella. "Surely you could have warned the school via the telemagickeraph?"

"I was leaving this bit to the last, you know how much of a luvvy I am. (This drew several sniggers from the Irregulars, but Professor Winch carried on unabashed). When the Council agreed to such drastic changes in the dispersion of magic energy, I knew immediately that this would heighten the risk of Hemlock Hall not only becoming visible to all and sundry, but that our enemies would try and take advantage of its reduced or even non-existent magic protection. I'm not a fortune teller, so I did not know it would be our latent turncoat Mr Jibb who would pass on such news to our enemies, but I had an inkling that someone would try to do so.

"Although it has been to no avail, I refrained from using the telemagickeraph to pass on this news in an attempt to at least delay the inevitable – a sort of magic radio silence, but in the end a wasted exercise, but at least I knew I could rely on Edward and Francis to carry out their task. They have indeed done so, thus Ezekiel, and by extension the entire school – are now forewarned."

Estella nodded to indicate she now understood her leader's reasoning, but didn't make further comment as she knew Professor Winch wished to continue.

" . . . But there is more. What also occupied my mind was how we could defend Hemlock Hall from any such enemy attack. What I am about to tell you, has, on previous occasions been suggested but has never transpired. This has been due to strong and long-standing opposition from a great many people, myself included. Regretfully, it has now become a vital necessity: part of the defence force of Hemlock Hall will include quite a number ofLithuanian Warrior Dragons. . . "

Gasps of disbelief and looks of horror could be heard right around the room. The Lithuanian Warrior Dragon had long been used by many enemies of the WFW and the peace loving magic community. This vicious beast was greatly feared, even by many battle-hardened veterans such as Big Bill.

"'Ere, 'Eadmaster, I 'opes they knows 'oo's side they's on. Don' wan' any 'orrible Lutheran Dragons sinjin' my ar'– er – pardon, ladies, me backside."

Professor Winch did his best to placate Big Bill and the rest of the shocked Irregulars.

"I understand how you all feel. Rather frustratingly, this task should and would normally fall to seasoned campaigners, but there simply are no spare troops available, none. Even if there were, I would not be able to recall anyone from the units that have been posted elsewhere, at least not in time. So – it's just us, nobody else.

"However, I am hopeful that your worries will be eased when I tell you that in order to secure and transport the dragons, I have procured the assistance of another friend of our beleaguered community, none other than Denzil Moriarty – the world famous dragon tamer. He has had a great deal of experience with all breeds of dragons, including the most ferocious, which of

course includes Lithuanian Warrior Dragons.

"Denzil has, with my blessing, also agreed to work with you. He is confident that he will be able to train you all up to enable you to ride these dragons into battle – or at least some of you. . .

(No words were uttered, but there were audible gasps from all present upon hearing this most unwelcome news).

"Denzil has assured me that as long as he is there to settle them into their new surroundings upon their arrival, then there should no problems, either in battle or otherwise." (He glanced at Big Bill and gave him a quick smile).

The others just shook their heads in disbelief. They did not have Professor Winch's confidence when it came to relying on Lithuanian Warrior Dragons to know whose side they were supposed to be on.

Worst affected was Agnes. "I'm getting too old for this malarkey," she whispered to her good friend Florence. "I'm not too happy about it myself," agreed Florence.

Professor Winch of course heard all this. He gave the ladies a sympathetic smile but made no comment.

Jacinta and Nathaniel looked uneasily at each other. They too doubted the wisdom of such a plan, but what made it even worse for them was the involvement of their two sons.

Professor Winch took another long look around the room at his Irregulars. There was still a great deal of badly disguised headshaking, but even worse was Mike. Professor Winch couldn't even see his face, but surmised it to be ashen as Mike continued to stare down at the table.

Mike did not know much at all about dragons, even the Tardy Dragon, but endless films and stories of such beasts brought about visions of the entire company either being burnt to a crisp – or at least ripped to shreds by the giant talons and razor sharp teeth of a ferocious dragon.

There were still similar worried looks from the others, but Professor Winch decided it was prudent to move on.

"I think that Lithuanian Warrior Dragons can wait – at least a little while longer, as we have another urgent matter to discuss.

Although we appear to have won today's battle, one battle does not win a war. Mark my words, the warlocks will be back – although I rather fancy it will be with a new leader. Such cowardice as shown by Zezk today will not go unpunished, the retribution on the poor fellow will be unspeakable. However – as I've said, the warlocks will return.

"And what about King Arthur's warning? Krickenstaltz will be the enemy's greatest prize? I actually thought he meant The League of Mordred, but that's the thing about dead kings, so damned vague in their warnings and omens, and what to do and what not to do."

Momentarily forgetting their fears, there was once again sniggers all round at such uncustomary criticism from Professor Winch, and the old man himself was grateful for the brief humorous respite.

"So – Krickenstaltz still needs to be defended . . . but by whom? It has

already been agreed that most of the WSS will be needed to defend Hemlock Hall, with the remainder just as urgently needed elsewhere. Not only that, but after thanking Vlad and his herd for their magnificent effort, Vlad, although apologetic, is at this very moment leading them all back home again. Unfortunately the vegetation here was simply not sustaining them.

"Then of course there's Professor Stannich, he will need a lot of help with the Magic Army. And my elderly friends of the Council will need protection – if anything happens to them it's all over anyway, regardless of what victories we may achieve elsewhere. So – who goes – and who stays?"

Mike, although still taking in his headmaster's comments, mused on where he should be during this difficult time for the magic community. Despite his very obvious dread fear, he quickly made up his mind.

"Professor, I know you may not agree with this considering the signs given to me – er – us, by King Arthur – but I want to go to Hemlock Hall as soon as possible. I know it is dangerous and I know I may even die – but I couldn't live with myself if any of my friends were killed by the enemy and I wasn't there with them, even if we defeat the enemy for good here."

The ladies of the gallant Irregulars could not help it. They burst into tears at hearing such valiant words from one so young. And it was not just the ladies. Josh, as usual, did his impression of a wolf-whale saying hello, and there were very moist pairs of eyes on the faces of every one of the male contingent.

Professor Winch knew they had to press on.

"That decides it. All of the usual gang must go back to Hemlock Hall. However, as my good friend Ren will be with our two other grandees mustering the Magic Army in their defence against further warlock attacks, I need to find both a commander and an SIC to lead what few troops we will have on the ground. So – any volunteers. . . ?"

A totally unfit, very fat and scruffy looking Alexandru Galleron had just walked into the room. He had heard Professor Winch's request for a volunteer. "I'll do it, Professor, this country is my home now. I'd be too upset to leave it behind now at my time of life."

Professor Winch looked awkward. He hesitated for a few seconds, then made his mind up.

"Alex, I'm sorry, you are too old, and you're not exactly in tip-top form, are you?"

"With all due respect, Headmaster, I'm more able than I appear to be. Watch."

Alex went to amaze everyone by doing a cartwheel right around the room. He fell flat on his back and gave out a huge groan, before even making one full turn.

"Nice try, me ole mucker! Least you got 'eart, no-one can say you ain't!" said Big Bill. "Mr Professor, sir, I'se an idea. Let Alex stay, an' I'll stay wiv 'im. Howzat, eh?"

Yet again there was a late addition to the attendees of the meeting. This

time, Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne walked in and had heard the latest proposal.

"Sorry, Big Bill, but I think I should stay with Alex. Your particular skills will be in great demand in the battle for Hemlock Hall. Headmaster, I implore you to let me stay. I'll liaise with Ren and I'll keep Alex out of trouble. By the look of him he's already in it!"

To sniggers around the room, Alex clutched his bruised sides and uneasily rested his back while sitting rather stiffly in an armchair.

"Thanks very much. Ooh, ow!"

"That decides it – I think! Alex and Anthony will stay with Ren, the rest of us will go back to Hemlock Hall. I'm sure we would all like to offer our thanks to both these brave and loyal men. Let's hope and pray we all meet up again soon," mused Professor Winch.

The Irregulars and their leader stood and clapped to show their approval of such willingness from both Alexandru Galleron and Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne. The fact that it could also mean sacrifice added poignancy to the ovation.

"If you would all make your way to the sixth oak door, I will join you shortly. I just want to go over a few things with the Council, and also to take a hot toddy to Aloysius . . . he's gone down with the Corona virus, but he should be OK in a couple of days."

The Irregulars made their way from the War Room and along the corridor to the sixth oak door, where those staying and those leaving would trade fond farewells.

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From Red China to Green Thornton

NO SOONER had the Irregulars left for Hemlock Hall than Professor Winch reconvened the meeting of the full WFW Council. The attendees now included two ex officio members. These were the two WFW agents who happened to still be at Krickenstaltz, none other than Alexandru Galleron and Anthony Ffyffe-Tremayne.

"Gentlemen, as you know, our unit of Irregulars have transmuted to Hemlock Hall, following these are the WSS on broomstick. The WSS will, of course, be some way behind The League of Mordred. This is not as big an inconvenience as you may think, as it will be useful to have our men flying behind Zenith and his army as they approach the school. Let us hope that on this occasion there will be no nasty surprises and that we do indeed have them trapped. However, we will have to leave this in the capable hands of the new WSS Commodore, Brad Kowalski. I will contact him later.

"As for the transporting of our clay-bound Magic Army from China to Thornton, this will be completed by Ren Stannich, ably assisted by your good selves. Are we all agreed on this?"

After momentary thought from some of the elderly elite characterised by the stroking of their long white beards, unanimous support was given to Professor Winch's proposal.

"Thank you, all of you. Now Alex and Anthony, this final point mainly concerns you both. As you know, Krickenstaltz has become vulnerable to attack by the warlocks, and anybody else for that matter.

"What you will not know is that you will not even have the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment here, as we speak, they are being redeployed to various strategic points across the UK. Ostensibly, this was in response to an urgent request from the Lord Mayor, he has asked for extra troops to marshal the currently chaotic scenes which are sadly the case throughout all the magic communities of Great Britain . . . and I have to admit that their horses will be invaluable in crowd control.

"However, what Mr Mainbrace does not know is that there is method in my madness. The real reason the cavalry has been shipped over to the UK is to ensure we have reinforcements should they be needed. I sincerely hope this will not be the case, and I am confident that with the help of Brad and his boys we can hold the school, but nothing is certain.

"Of course, in the light of what has been agreed regarding the defence of Hemlock Hall, the regiment would have been a handy source of battle-hardened veterans who we could have utilised as dragon riders, but time and the fluidity of warfare has snatched that chance away from us.

"But as ever, I digress. . .

"So – from now and up until the Magic Army is ready, all you will have is one WSS Unit. This is made up of elderly reserves who can no longer endure full-time active service, but should be sprightly enough to man the walls, or act as static or even semi-mobile guards within the building.

"This unfortunate state of reduced defences should only last for a few hours, one day at most – but it could be an absolutely critical fortune-changing few hours. However, and as ever – you must simply take what comes when it comes. But, first things first: due to its very recent formation your new unit currently has no commander, hence my asking for volunteers earlier, which I again heartily thank both of you for. So, just so we're clear, you, Alex, will be their temporary leader, and you, Anthony, will be his SIC. Agreed?"

"Yes, Professor, agreed," said Alex.

"No problem, old bo – er – yes, Professor, agreed. You can count on me," said Anthony. Professor Winch gave Anthony a friendly frown, if there is any such thing.

"Hmmm – glad to hear it – old fellow. (This brought a wry smile from Anthony). As for deployment, in the main this will be entirely up to you. The both of you have my utmost confidence so please act as you see fit, this will circumvent the usual chain of command, thus preventing any lengthy and perhaps potentially critical delays."

The two agents as well as the entire Council gravely nodded to indicate that they had taken all this in, and were in full agreement of what was being asked of them.

"Now, gentlemen, are there any questions any of you would like to ask, or any final comments you would like to make?"

There was an audible no from some and shakes of the head from others. Professor Winch turned to Ren Stannich, thinking his good friend would like to say something. However, Ren's mind was on the fate of his children, supposedly evacuated to safety but in reality now in mortal danger, as were the rest of Mike's friends. Professor Winch recognised this and did not ask him again.

"Very well. And now my friends, it is time to go . . . Goodbye for now – and good luck."

Ren and the rest of the Council stood and followed Professor Winch out of the room. This was so they could all offer their own personal farewells.

Ren's mind was, of course, still on his two children, Juliette and Vincent. He sighed and forced himself to concentrate on matters immediately at hand, and went off to make plans concerning the Magic Army.

Less than thirty minutes later, Ren and his colleagues were to be found once more in the bare room beyond the sixth oak door. This time it was to activate the Time Crystals of Glastonbury.

"Right zen, Zeptimooz, if you take ze left 'andle, and you, Engelbengl, ze right. (This drew a look of fury from Engelbert). I vill activate ze main 'andle

on ze front. Ze rest ov you, stand back pleeze."

Ren turned the larger handle on the front clockwise, all the while muttering spells which would free the crystals from their geographical defaults and allow ad hoc magical navigation.

When the first puff of smoke appeared, he gestured for Septimus and Engelbengl to commence winding. Soon the room was covered in different coloured smoky plumes: orange, red, green and yellow.

Ren told his friends to stop winding but continued to mutter spells under his breath. This was the fine-tuning necessary to enable the proposed journey to be made.

Two distinctly different images began to form within the multicoloured smoky mist hovering above the frame containing the crystals.

The first was of a strange looking building. It was low in height but quite wide, and at each end there were two towers. These had a hint of the classic oriental pagoda design, but had a far more business-like appearance than most classic pagodas. This was the museum of Xi'an in China, which houses the famous Terracotta Warriors.

The second image was that of a farmer's field. This seemingly had disused farming equipment strewn here and there. There was a burnt-out barn at one end, but belying this decay was a brand new house right next to it. This had a distinct look of an army barrack house. This was of course, the barrack house used by the Irregulars on their various sojourns to the little town of Thornton.

"Huh! Zo ziss iz ver all our money 'az gone?! Gaarh! Right zen, gentlemen. I vill need to do ziss alone, zo pleeze stand back."

Ren aimed a wand at the image of the Xi'an Museum.

'ZUXZPENDIUMZ ANIMATOZ! MOLECULONZIUM TRANSPORTATUMZ! CHRONO-PASSOGIUM ZORNTON!'

Ren turned to his friends who were stood silently watching the proceedings. Alex and Anthony were all agog. They had never witnessed this particular usage of the crystals before.

"Vile ziss part ov ze spell beginz to activate, I vill concentrate on vot 'az to 'appen at Zornton." He then pointed his wand at the image of Seldon's Farm in Thornton.

'PREPERATIUM! REZEPTIUM! MAGIK ARMY IN-TRANSPORTATIUMZ!'

The observers were amazed to find that the farmer's field had been converted into a military training camp, complete with assault courses, weaponry, and every conceivable piece of apparatus needed for training up an army – and quickly at that. To the end of the field away from all of the apparatus, figures began to form, thousands of them all in lines. They all just stood there in perfect formation, deathly still. The imported Xi'an warriors no

longer had their outer casings of clay, but stood there in the full battle dress of the Magic Army, last seen in action many years earlier in the Leprechaun Wars. Although powerful wizards themselves, Anthony and Alex gasped in astonishment at such a spectacle.

Ren addressed his friends once more.

"Gentlemen, I 'ave to leave you for a short vile, but I vill be back later on."

Ren, to the surprise of his less knowing colleagues, calmly walked to the frame, carefully lifted out one of the crystals and put it in his pocket. From another pocket he pulled out a brand new wartime issue TMG.

"I 'ate zeez modern zingz. Oh, vell. I vill be back soon."

The professor raised his TMG, shouted 'Zornton!', and he disappeared. What Ren did not know, was that Professor Winch had reset both the time crystals and the TMG to react to his less than perfect English. If he had not, then similar to the Blackpool trip, Ren would have got nowhere fast, especially as his diplomatic daughter Juliette was not around to assist him.

The old professor now found himself in Seldon's Farm. All around its edge was a bluey grey haze similar to the one experienced by the Irregulars when on Glastonbury Tor. This was because Ren had created a different time dimension. To the locals of Thornton it was once again the same rundown farm it had been before two veritable coachloads of wizards and witches had made three visits between them.

He had even modified things to enable anyone should they so desire, to just bimble in and walk around, or even have a mooch about the broken-down farmhouse which Ren had magically reinstituted and replaced on its original site. This had become possible due to part of the spell containing Dual-Dimensioning Magic. This allowed Ren to proceed uninterrupted with the urgent task of creating an almost invincible army — the Magic Army.

The tremendous inherent power of the Time Crystals of Glastonbury were about to be combined with additional power, gleaned and cannibalised from many other magic sources.

There was just one more thing to do before such levels of cosmic energy could be unleashed.

Ren took the crystal out of his pocket and balanced it on the tip of his wand which he was now holding straight up. The moment the rare cut-glass crystal touched, the tip of the wand opened out, expanded upwards and then closed in on the crystal, securing it firmly in place, The cane with its encased crystal now looked like an ornamental rhododendron bush in bud.

Ren Stannich walked down to the end of the field to where the warriors were stood, line after line, row upon row, and all deadly still. He walked up to the first warrior, and ensuring it was the crystal which actually made contact, tapped him on the shoulder with the wand while uttering 'Respensium!' A golden glow emanated from the warrior, forcing Ren to shield his eyes.

The warrior then sprang into life, turned round to face the warrior behind, and placed his hand on his shoulder. A golden fire-trail shot out from the first

warrior's hand, which then spread out, immersing the entire body of the second warrior who was soon also glowing brightly. This warrior then sprang to life, turned, and did exactly the same thing to the warrior behind him.

Ren painstakingly went to the front of each line of warriors, doing the same thing each time, setting off a chain reaction: each warrior being brought back to a conscious state by the warrior in front.

Ren stood there patiently, hoping that nothing would go wrong with the reanimation process as had happened on a previous occasion; but this time nothing did.

With the bright golden glow fading from the leading warriors, and with the subsequent illumination of the more distant warriors not troubling the old professor in the least, Ren Stannich was now able to fully observe the proceedings.

It took about twenty minutes before the last man had been stirred back into life.

Without any command from Ren, the entire army did a smart about-turn to face their Commander.

Ren Stannich once more raised his wand, and uttered the words which would commence the training programme.

'OPTIUM REGULATO COMMENCIUM!'

If anyone not familiar with such magic had been watching the aged wizard, they would have been surprised to see what happened next. This was nothing to do with things grandiose, or bangs or explosions, or flashing lights, or an array of bright fiery colours, but was something rather more banal and humdrum.

Ren simply removed the crystal from the wand which then returned to its normal state. He then put the crystal in his pocket, his wand in his belt, and turned around and went into the house to make himself a ham sandwich and cup of coffee.

Although it certainly isn't usual for any army, even a magic one, to be fully retrained in about the same time as it takes to have a snack, this was what indeed was happening as Ren happily munched away on his sandwich and slurped his coffee.

Ren occasionally glanced out of the window. The tell-tale swirl of dust and garbled noise told him that hard military training was now in full vigour. Such training, which would usually take up to two years to complete in standard time, would, courtesy of the application of such intensely powerful magic, be completed in just a matter of minutes.

Although the Council had made repeated concessions to both Professor Winch and Ren to help speed up the process, Ren had bargained one more time for an even greater diversion of Magic energy, thus powering the crystals to release and fully utilise their own cosmic powers.

This one last alteration had resulted in Jean Michelle's Top-Deck Restaurant

being closed for, there's that phrase again, the duration.

During the recent shut-down of much of the infrastructure which allows the magic community to remain hidden from the ordinary world, Ren had rather unwisely kept putting the Top-Deck Restaurant further and further back in the queue for the big switch-off. This was after constant haranguing from his old business buddy Jean Michelle. He had pleaded with Ren repeatedly to see if his establishment could somehow be exempted from the shut-down, whether officially or otherwise – such trifles never worried Jean Michelle. Ren eventually caved in, as he often had done in his dealings with the Frenchman over many years, but now – out of sheer unavoidable necessity, Ren could do nothing but renege on this rather rash promise.

Ren nearly choked on his sandwich as he mused on what Jean Michelle would say when next they met.

The training itself was being carried out by the front warrior in each row. These were the Sergeant-Majors of the Magic Army.

Although Professor Winch had seemed to dismiss some of Ren's concerns (but in reality his leader had simply been acting the fatalist), Ren Stannich knew that age decays, or at least can do so – even if the most powerful, most deepest magic is imbued upon an object worthy of such attention. With this in mind, Ren knew that the reanimation of such an ancient magical fighting force had indeed been a major gamble.

He had always known that there was a significant risk that a certain number of the warriors might not survive their long-term storage – or if they did, their transportation to Thornton. Upon hearing and seeing the undoubted hubbub created by a massive army undergoing extensive training, frequently punctuated by yells of "Get yer 'air cut!", Ren was able to give a huge sigh of relief. The gamble had paid off, at least thus far.

About thirty minutes later, he heard the sound which signalled that the process was complete.

The eight-thousand soldiers which made up the Magic Army belted out the Magic Anthem, while standing with their shields held to their chest and their swords placed across their shields.

Ren finished his coffee and went out again to witness this magnificent site. He stood at the front of the house and took in the wondrous spectacle of eight-thousand men, loyal to the cause of the magic community and the even greater cause of good for all, singing with all their might. The tears tripped his face as they sang the final chorus. The fact that their existence and their allegiance to the WFW was more to do with magical contrivance rather than being the personal choice of sentient beings, did not enter his mind for a moment.

Ren closed his eyes and put his hand to his left ear. "Yes, Ren?" replied Septimus.

"It's done. Please ensure the grounds are cleared," said Ren.

"Yes, Ren, we have already done this. You may return when you are ready."

"Thank you."

Ren opened his eyes, raised his wand, and uttered the incantation which would take them all back to Krickenstaltz.

'TRANSPORTATIUMZ! GLORIO DEFENZIUM KRICKENSTALTZ!'

There was adeafening roar from the army as they shouted "TO THE DEFENCE OF KRICKENSTALTZ!" and hit their shields with their swords. Ren raised his arms; there was silence; and then Ren and the Magic Army were gone.

Ren reappeared high up on the parapets of Krickenstaltz while the Magic Army filled the grounds surrounding the magic citadel.

After Ren had scanned the grounds and had taken in this magnificent site, his smile of satisfaction suddenly gave way to a frown. He had noticed something untoward.

Although there were indeed a great many soldiers protecting Krickenstaltz, it was not nearly as many as had stood in the field in Thornton. Ren tutted to himself, just as he was joined by Septimus, Engelbert, Anthony and Alex. Septimus gave his friend a sympathetic smile.

"You have still done well, my friend, very well. We all knew that some would not make it because of their great age. For all to survive long-term storage is an impossibility on its own, but for all to then survive two transmutations would be a miracle, but we still have a magnificent army to defend us all."

"Yez, yez, I suppoze you are right. Zank you."

"Come below, old friend. Alex has prepared a fine meal for us all."

They all trooped back down to the makeshift canteen set up by Alexandru Galleron in one of the many disused rooms below the Academy. Their eschewing of the all-ranks mess was not uncharacteristic latent elitism, but simple necessity from a military point of view. And besides, no-one ever said that a Council of War held in camera, and corned beef hash with stewed tea had to be separate entities.

Over their meal, Alex and Anthony could not help but fire questions at Ren concerning the taking of the Magic Army from Xi'an.

"What about the Xi'an authorities? What on earth are they going to say?" asked Alex. Ren as well as the rest of the Council laughed out loud.

"I was thinking the same thing myself," said Anthony, "what's so funny?"

Ren used up three of his friends' napkins to wipe the copious amount of olive oil from his mouth, face, shirt and hands, and then gave Alex the chef a funny look. He then proceeded to answer – but with a question.

"Vot do you zink ze auzoriteez az vell az ze toureestz, zink ov ze vorriuz?"

Alex looked at Anthony, who in turn just shrugged his shoulders. Both were clueless.

Ren chuckled once more, but not before finally clearing his right ear of the last of the errant olive oil.

"Zey all zink zat zey are made ov clay. Yez?"

"Er – yes, I suppose so," said Alex, still not sure where this was going.

Anthony just smiled a pretend knowing smile. He still wasn't sure either.

"Zo zat iz vot zey 'ave got. Yez?"

The little assembly bar Anthony and Alex burst into laughter. Both politely smiled and just recommenced eating their oily meal.

"Lovely broth, this," said Anthony, who had seen his friend looking a little down. This was after receiving a host of funny looks and glares from the others.

"Thank you very kindly," lied Alex, who actually thought he had made rather a good duck a l'orange.

65

The Grudge Match

THE IRREGULARS REAPPEARED in Hemlock Hall. There to greet them were Professor Ezekiel Creek and Ted and Franky Morse. Professor Winch did not remain on ceremony but simply nodded to his deputy and walked off.

"About time too!" said Ezekiel. "We are facing extinction at any moment, and you lot have been philandering and gadding about in some far flung outpost!"

"My dear sir!" retorted an infuriated Professor Cornstone, while the rest just stood there open mouthed and not believing their ears. This was especially true of Ernst and Gregor, who resented their home which they loved dearly being referred to as a far flung outpost. But Ezekiel's face broke into a big grin.

"Welcome back, everyone! Firstly, there is no point in you all getting hungry, regardless of how many enemies are racing towards us . . . Franky will brief you quickly on the situation with the warrior dragons, and then there will be refreshments for you all, but not here. A meal has kindly been laid on for everyone at the Lonely Unicorn. This will help to some degree in stopping the children getting curious as to why you are all here and what you are up to. Please be seated while Franky brings you all up to date. Franky?"

Franky stood and cleared his throat, while everyone sat down around two tables in the centre of the hall.

"Settled?" asked Franky. "Good. The Lithuanian Warrior Dragons have arrived and are safely tethered at the edge of Shadowbrooke Farm. Old man Harris has been paid off handsomely to disappear for a while, as have the farmhands. The dragons, are, as we speak, being prepared by our esteemed friend, Denzil Moriarty.

"You will no doubt be glad to hear that Denzil has chosen a clutch of dragons which have long been used by our old allies, the Eurasian Warrior Wizards. This was during their many battles against the Cosslocks some years ago. This is instead of taking them from the main dragon colony now resettled in Skelmersdale, of which many did indeed side with our enemies.

"Denzil has also assured me that the warrior dragons will know the enemy when they see them, and just as importantly will not be of any danger to us – hopefully. . . "

There were wry smiles from some of the company, and a few nervous twitches upon hearing the word 'hopefully'.

"How many dragons are there, Franky?" asked Gregor.

"Six," replied Franky. "I know it's not many, but warrior dragons can do things which even Big Bill would be in awe of."

"An' don' I knows it! I still feel the pain in me ar—"

"Bill!" shouted Estella.

"Sorry," said Big Bill Dooley, to chuckles all round the room.

"Do we know who is going to be riding them?" asked Ernst.

"This isn't up to Ted and I, really. After this little session, it's really over to Denzil. Even then, Denzil will only pass on his recommendations, after that it will be up to Professor Winch. That means you will all have to be trained up to be ready for any contingency. As for Ted and I, we have been asked to be part of the irregular unit left on the ground.

"One thing I do know for sure: at the moment, Lithuanian Warrior Dragons are the only major line of defence that we have here at Hemlock Hall. The idea is for us to use the dragons to meet The League of Mordred head on when they are nearing the school. If all goes to plan then we should have them trapped, as the WSS will then come up from the rear."

Mike visibly gulped upon hearing this. Estella saw the look of worry on his face and put her arm around his shoulder to comfort him.

Josh had also seen Mike's less than joyful reaction and spoke up.

"I sincerely hope this does not include Mike, because if it does you will have to think again!"

Mike the Valiant emerged once more. Although fearful of the prospect he again showed his bravery.

"No, Josh, it's OK. If I have to ride a warrior dragon, I will."

But Mike was drowned out by the angry Irregulars who saw no reason for their young friend to continue to put himself at risk, or even worse, to be put at risk by others.

Ted Morse came to his brother's aid.

"Hang on! Hang on! Franky and I were simply told to pass on what we know. He's already told you it's not our decision, so what are you getting on his back for?!"

Ted even gave his own mother and father a disapproving look, as they too had been part of the protest.

Mr and Mrs Morse both blushed at this. They really were caught in an awkward situation, because they too both longed to see Mike be allowed to return to a normal life.

Although Jacinta and Nathaniel diplomatically but reluctantly backed off, the others continued to protest on Mike's behalf, despite continual pleas from the brothers not to shoot the messenger.

Franky panicked and arrived at what he thought would be a way out, believing Mike's inexperience would take him out of the reckoning.

"Look! There are six dragons! Let's try you all out and let's just have the best six riders! Surely that's fair?!"

The Irregulars immediately cottoned on to Franky's thinking and went for the compromise, but Mike most certainly did not.

"Listen, everyone, I didn't ask for King Arthur to make a fuss of me, but seeing that he has, I feel it is my duty to be involved in whatever happens

from now on. If it is my destiny to take part in another battle and ride a Lithuanian Warrior Dragon, then that is what I am going to do."

Professor Cornstone, deep in thought up until that moment, suddenly spoke up.

"Wrong! You heard the man! The best six, OK? I do not doubt your bravery or the logic of your thinking, but there are only six dragons! But what about the rest of us? Are those who miss out also to feel so affronted? Does this mean they are somehow – *useless?*"

Professor Cornstone just couldn't help it. Sheer force of habit made him glance at Josh Beecham as he said this. Josh, who never missed such insults, made a mental note of the need for revenge at some point in the future.

" . . . No, I think not. Let's keep this simple: based on airborne battle experience, that makes me number one. You now only have five to find."

Although Professor Cornstone knew this would happen, his assertion that he was Number One was taken as a show of arrogance of the highest order. None realised that he was simply reducing the chances of Mike getting his wish.

There ensued a confused verbal melee. On the one hand there was outrage at Professor Cornstone's arrogance, and on the other, a contradictory assent that he was probably right.

Ted and Franky looked at each other, sighed, and shrugged their shoulders. Neither had been batting for either Mike's inclusion or exclusion, but were simply there to pass on what they themselves had been told.

Mike had had enough. He took no notice of Professor Cornstone's assertion of his superiority, nor his implying that he (Mike) was simply not experienced enough.

"Well? Do I get to ride one or not?"

"Not," was basically the answer, as his friends, while proud of his bravery still did not yield to his wishes. But Professor Cornstone saw Mike's face, which was not only showing real anger but also determination.

"Ahem! I may have a solution to this: a challenge . . . a duel, if you will. I propose that as my place is reserved, so to speak, it is fitting that anyone else who so desperately wants to be one of the dragon riders, should try and beat me in such a duel.

"I propose that Mike and I should mount our broomsticks and have an airborne battle. No battle-wands, mind, just jousters. If Mike beats me, even I will concede that he deserves his chance. All agreed?"

To Professor Cornstone's disappointment, all was not agreed. There was more fierce opposition from the Irregulars, but to Mike this was his one and only chance to remain true to the faith shown in him by King Arthur.

"I'll do it! If that's what it takes to convince you all, I'll do it!"

"You most certainly will not, young man!" said the horrified Ezekiel. "As has already been suggested, the most practical suggestion is to take the best six riders, this shenanigans won't prove anything! You will not be having an airborne duel with a man who has lost his senses!"

"Try and stop us!" retorted the man who had lost his senses. "To the Arena!"

Professor Cornstone and Mike marched off and out of the building, not actually caring whether anyone followed or not, but the stunned Irregulars and an angry Ezekiel Creek did indeed follow.

Such drama was never, ever, going to be kept secret from the rest of the school, especially as two po-faced but familiar personae marched past the windows of the main building. These were followed by several others, some of whom were strangers to their about to be observers.

It was just before the first lesson and most pupils were in their common rooms, gathering up their books.

This particular morning's lessons were bitterly resented by most of the pupils – it was Saturday. Because of the enforced absences of some of the staff, many lessons from throughout the week had been rearranged to take place on Saturday instead. This was to ensure the school kept up with the curriculum.

Tobias Jordache, looking out of the window to check if it was a good day for outdoor photography, spotted the strange goings on immediately.

"Hey! Come and look at this! It's Corny and Mike! I think they are going to have a fight!"

The floor quickly became a sea of jumbled books and bags as everyone rushed to the windows, even jumping over tables to get to the front. Unfortunately for Dutch and Leo, they missed out on this early furor as they had been hurried along to lessons by the more studious girls.

The same excitement which was at fever pitch in the Camelot common room, soon welled up throughout the whole school.

When everyone realised that whatever was about to happen was going to do so on the pitch usually reserved for Empires, the whole school streamed out of the main building and over to the Arena. This was despite the feeble orders and useless threats emanating from the alarmed teaching staff to get them to refrain from doing so.

Professor Cornstone and Mike Miller mounted their broomsticks. Each held a jousting stick. They flew to the middle of the pitch, engaged in a quick conversation, and then each flew to opposite ends of the Arena.

The noise of the crowd was tremendous.

Unfortunately for the professor, his years of verbal abuse and all round bad attitude had left him without any support whatsoever, even from his own house.

Tobias Jordache watched these goings on with fascination, quickly arriving at the following (and rather novel) conclusion:

"It's a grudge match! They're having a grudge match! Isn't this great!" enthused Tobias, who had endured almost a bad a time of it as Mike had whenever he had had combined science lessons.

While Tobias continued his full and very vocal approval of what was happening, Mike's friends joined their fellow students.

"What's goin' on here?" asked Dutch.

"It's Mike and Corny! They're having a scrap!" yelled Tobias, camera at the ready.

"Brill!" yelled Dutch, as his face lit up with delight.

"Am I glad I came to Hemlock Hall!" enthused Vincent.

"You're joking!" shouted Madeline and Abigail at the same time, while Juliette just shook her head.

Leo, although not far away, was not making an effort to squeeze through to the others, but he did wonder what on earth was happening.

Dutch and Vincent unceremoniously pushed their way to the front to get a better view.

Dutch cupped his hands and yelled, "Give him a belt for me, Mike! Oh, and welcome back!"

"Yeah, Mike! Give it to him good 'n' proper!" added Vincent.

"Too right! Atta boy, Mike! Sort him out once and for all!" agreed Dutch.

Unfortunately for Dutch this boomed right around the Arena, causing an angry Professor Cornstone to look up and scan the crowd. Dutch then heard an angry and all too familiar voice – in his mind.

"You'll pay for that, France! And how!" Dutch decided to keep quiet from then on.

Although the girls were the models of decorum, on the outside – inside they were rooting for Mike.

Sarah was also there, clasping her hands tightly together and fluttering her eyelids. This was not for Professor Cornstone.

As must have been previously agreed – although reluctantly, Ezekiel Creek activated the dragon-roar and the airborne duel began.

Mike looked across to his opponent – and gulped; the professor looked back – and sneered.

With grim determination they immediately raced towards each other.

Many of the crowd (but not Japonica Lemon, who squealed with delight and clapped her hands), looked away at what they thought could only be an inevitable high impact crashing of heads and a perhaps fatal plummet to the ground. Although a seemingly demonic Mike did not waver, Professor Cornstone dived at the last second, going upside down at the same time. The professor lashed out and upwards with his jouster and hoped to lift Mike clear off his broomstick, but Mike ducked to one side just in time. The professor was nearly unseated due to the continuing momentum but quickly managed to steady himself.

The traditional oohs and aahs of an excited crowd punctuated the deafening roars coming from right around the whole Arena.

Mike looped the loop, hoping to surprise his opponent with a quick thrust as he came back up, but this was not to be. As Mike struck out, the professor showed his long experience and simply flew straight up a few feet, causing Mike to miss his target.

Both combatants were level again.

Mike feinted to the left, lunged out at the professor, but missed. Professor Cornstone hit Mike right in the chest, causing a now winded and dazed Mike to slip over the side of his broomstick. He managed to hang on but he was then whacked hard on the back.

Mike was now hanging on by his fingertips.

The professor smashed his jouster down but missed as Mike somehow managed to remount and fly backwards out of immediate danger. Mike stopped, darted forward again, and walloped Professor Cornstone on the back of the head.

It was now the professor's turn to slip down on one side and the crowd thought he had gone, but he hadn't. He sat bolt upright and shot straight up in the air, then immediately nose-dived down toward Mike and lunged at him with his jouster.

This time Mike feinted to the right, but then veered left and shoulder barged his opponent. Although this put the professor in a spin, he turned this to his advantage and span back towards Mike while doing rowing motions with his jouster. This took Mike by surprise, and the professor was able to inflict several wallops to his head and chest, with Mike only just managing to stay on his broomstick.

Mike finally dodged this barrage and regained the advantage by performing crazy cartwheels, while at the same time managing to hit his opponent repeatedly, but Mike did not enjoy having the upper hand for very long.

Professor Cornstone finally manoeuvred himself out of Mike's line of fire.

Before Mike could close in again and resume the barrage, the professor suddenly did a somersault. As he came back up he hit Mike with great force in the stomach.

A badly winded Mike shot backwards at great speed. After forcing himself to regain control of his rapidly reversing broomstick and although still struggling to breathe normally, he knew it really was now or never.

Mike went into a crocodile roll and span round and around at great speed with his jouster just sticking straight out. This unexpected high-speed move from Mike took Professor Cornstone completely by surprise. Mike was able to rain hundreds of blows down upon his opponent's head, chest and body.

The stunned professor was unable to muster any reply at all, and soon found himself plummeting to the ground.

"YEEEEHAAAAAAHH!" came the unified assent from all around the Arena. This was not only to celebrate Mike's triumph but upon witnessing the arrogant professor's humbling descent into a hastily conjured up mud bath.

Mike Miller had won the duel.

While a victorious but exhausted Mike Miller slumped on his broomstick, Professor Cornstone was slowly dragged up from the mud by his colleagues. This was despite the heartfelt refrain of "Leave him there!" from more than one highly delighted student – and several of the staff.

The other teachers, after giving puzzled looks towards Ezekiel and the strange gathering to the far side of the Arena, finally regained control and

managed to herd the whole school back inside.

Ezekiel Creek looked towards his clandestine comrades and then to the remainder of the puzzled staff of Hemlock Hall. He realised an explanation of some sort was needed, even if it was a load of old flannel. He walked over and gestured for the staff to gather around.

"Please listen carefully, everyone. . .

"First of all, I apologise for all this kerfuffle, but all will soon become clear. Due to certain developments, it has become necessary for all of the children to be confined to not only within the main building, but in their common rooms, until I – er – say otherwise."

The staff just stood there, looking perplexed. "Now, please!" insisted Ezekiel.

"Yes, Professor! Right away!"

Ezekiel rejoined the Irregulars and beckoned them back into the Main Hall.

Once seated, the row broke out once more.

"So, Professor, does that mean I can ride a warrior dragon?" asked Mike.

Professor Cornstone did not answer, did not even look at Mike, and with a face like thunder just stared straight ahead.

Josh, who certainly did not want Mike riding a dragon either, nevertheless felt he had to bow to the uncommon courage of his fifteen year old charge.

"A promise is a promise, Edwin. He did beat you, and on your own terms. So – does he get his wish or not?"

"Yes — dammit! Yes! Yes! Yes! Happy?!" thundered Professor Cornstone.

"No, not really!" retorted Josh. "But if Mike's so determined to ride a flamin' Lithuanian Warrior Dragon, neither you nor I, nor anyone else for that matter – is going to stop him!"

The Irregulars smirked at the unintended dragon pun.

"Thank you, Josh," said Mike.

Although Professor Cornstone was still far from happy over the outcome, what the others did not realise was that he was simply concerned (as they were themselves), for the safety and well-being of a minor. Even the duel had been designed to give Mike the airborne thrashing of his life, purely to show him he was not up to the task.

Professor Cornstone now conceded that, perhaps, he had been proved wrong.

Ezekiel was painfully aware of the continuing tension, and thought it timely to remind them of the culinary distraction that awaited them all at the Lonely Unicorn.

"Well now, I believe that the training period is scheduled for one o'clock. We are not likely to come under attack until early tomorrow morning, so that gives us plenty of time to decamp to the village. All agreed?"

There was general agreement to this but not much enthusiasm. Ezekiel could just about make out muttered comments such as, "We might as well", or, "Can't be worse than here", and so on. Ezekiel tutted as he stood to lead the way.

"Erm – Professor Creek, I'd like to stay here and see my friends, can I?" asked Mike.

"Of course you can, Mike, but you'll have to be quick. I've decided it's too dangerous and I'm sending the whole school home."

There were utterings and mutterings of surprise from most of the gathering at this sudden announcement, but they were all very glad to hear it.

"I'm surprised you haven't done so already," said Professor Cornstone.

"It's not as easy as it sounds, Edwin." replied Ezekiel. "You forget that many of the children have never undertaken non-magic journeys, which they'll have to do now for obvious reasons. And worst luck, Barry Wimpole and his wife have gone off to Marbella with the Marsh's, so that little outfit can't help. It's been a nightmare sorting out help for those who need it, although the children themselves don't yet know it . . . but it's all been finalised – almost, thank goodness. . .

"Now, Jacinta and Nathaniel, and Ernst and Gregor, can I have a word with you in private? I was going to mention this later, but on reflection, now is probably better."

They all went to the far side of the room where traded whispers ensued.

"First of all, Ernst. Am I right in thinking that your niece and nephew will have nowhere to go for the duration, as it were?"

An embarrassed Ernst blushed and just nodded in reply.

"I thought that would be the case," continued Ezekiel, "but I do have an idea. Jacinta and Nathaniel, I know you have helped us out on many occasions and I am hoping we can count on you again. How do you feel about letting Juliette and Vincent Stannich stay at your holiday house for a while?"

"No problem at all," said Nathaniel, very clearly and with a warm smile, as he saw how awkward poor old Ernst was looking and no doubt feeling at that moment.

But there wasn't the same immediate, unequivocal answer in the affirmative from Jacinta.

"Oh dear. There would not normally be any problem whatsoever, Professor, but you are forgetting that Nat and I will be busy here. Even Edward and Francis would only be able to call in occasionally."

But Professor Creek smiled broadly.

"Yes, I thought you might mention that . . . but I may have a solution. Can you take in one more?"

"Yes, of course, but who do you have in mind?" replied a mystified Jacinta.

"Cooee!" a nervous looking young lady had just walked into the room.

"Ellen!" shouted those who knew her.

Gregor ran over to his fiancée, and they both flung their arms around each other.

"What are you doing here?" asked Gregor.

"After most people had gone, Professor Winch thought it would be safer for me here, but seeing as what's happened, Professor Creek asked if I could

help look after some of the children."

Jacinta beamed and walked over to Ellen and gave her a hug.

"Would you do that for Nathaniel and I? And they say the world is a cold place, but I now know better. Thank you, my dear, thank you."

"It's us who should be thanking you, really, so thank you!" said Ellen, who then squeezed the life out of her new friend, who in turn blubbered all over the shoulder of her coat.

Nathaniel came across to shake Ellen's hand.

"Thank you, my dear, thank you." He turned to Gregor. "She's a fine girl you've got there, Gregor, a fine girl! She reminds me of Jacinta when she was thi. . . She reminds me of Jacinta."

"Oh – erm – Mr and Mrs Morse, there is one more thing. I don't want to be cheeky, but is it possible for their friends to come and see them? On a day visit, or something like that? All of them have become inseparable, and it would be nice if they could meet up occasionally while – er – you know. . . "

"Of course, of course, dear! The more the merrier! And never mind day trips, we have a veritable cupboardful of sleeping bags and enough frozen bacon to feed an entire army stranded in Cleethorpes! Isn't it marvellous?!"

Despite the fact that it was Jacinta and Nathaniel allowing their house to be used, the good lady was in floods of tears as she always is whenever a problem concerning a child's welfare is solved, and is inconsolable when it isn't. Nathaniel saw this and immediately wondered if they had eight mops in the house. He just about restrained himself to just think it.

The tension between the Irregulars had disappeared. Ernst was relieved for both his niece and nephew, and of course his brother. Gregor was mightily glad to know that Ellen was also to be in a safe place.

Mike, whose decamping and scamping off had been badly delayed by the latent hubbub, was glad that all of his friends would be together in the one house, at least some of the time. And what a happy, homely, and presumably nutty house it was too – the Morses.

A much happier Ezekiel yet again made a move.

"Right then, you lot! Late as usual, the pies will be cold, but despite that, let's go to the pub!"

As most of the Irregulars went one way, Mike went the other and shouted, "See ya later!" and dashed off to the Camelot House common room.

66

Twists and Turns

MADELINE LOOKED UP to see Mike walking into the common room.

"Mike! What on earth is going on?! What were you and Professor Cornstone up to?!"

This was followed by loud excited demands from most of his little gang as to what the grudge match had been all about, and this was peppered with copious and hearty congratulations on his famous victory.

"Good to see all of you, too!" said Mike, although with a smile.

In all the excitement, no-one had actually said "Hello!" Enquries about fights with teachers, yes, plenty; what on earth had happened while he had been away this time, those too, but no simple hello and welcome back. As ever with Mike, he wasn't really annoyed or offended in any way.

His close friends, although initially puzzled by Mike jokily implying something along the lines of, "I've been away twenty years!", soon realised that for reasons which he may or may not ever explain, each moment was precious to him, or at least had become so very recently. With this in mind, they dutifully hugged him and ruffled his hair and pecked him on the cheek, and Abigail burst into tears. Mike drew the line when he saw Vincent and Dutch puckering up their lips.

But if Mike thought he would be left alone to sit and talk and relax with his best friends, he was very wrong.

Mike was soon swamped by the rest of Camelot House, who most certainly wanted to know what had been going on, and not just the recent display on the Empires pitch. Mike had still not advanced more than a yard into the common room and did not look likely to. He was now surrounded by a noisy mob of over-curious excited students. Mike was not allowed to catch his breath let alone sit down.

Vincent decided to act.

"Hey! Back off you lot! Give him some room!" But his motives were not entirely honourable. "So Mike, was it wolf-whales again? Have you fought any more warlocks?"

"Vincent!" protested Juliette. "Leave him be! Come on, Mike, come and sit down and tell us what all that was about."

This drew a wry smile from Mike.

"Yeah, Mike! That was brill!" enthused Dutch. "That's made up for the years of torture he's put us through!"

"He's not that bad, you know, once you get to know him," said Mike the magnanimous.

"Yeah, Mike, pull the other one!" replied Dutch, with a derisive laugh.

"Come on, mate, spill the beans,"

Mike didn't spill the beans, despite several more pleas from Dutch and many others of his classmates for him to do so.

But one person now withdrew from the hubbub and excitement. Juliette turned away and wiped her eyes; she was crying.

Mike's return had immediately filled Juliette's mind with thoughts of Marina and Laszlo. The siblings had heard the terrible news a short while earlier of their deaths, but not the exact manner of their passing. She suspected that Mike knew something of the tragedy, and that perhaps he may well have been there when they died. Thinking of them right now, immediately took some of the shine off the excitement of Mike being back.

But the siblings had been asked by their father not to dwell on the tragedy as it would do them no good. Juliette vaguely understood what her father had meant, and she and Vincent had agreed to do their best, but it was hard. Marina and Laszlo had not just been two of her father's employees, but two very dear friends of the whole family. It was a blessing to have had both of them around after their mother had been killed, but now they were gone too. Juliette felt a hand gently squeeze her arm. She turned back round to see Mike; he was looking very sad.

"They loved you and Vince deeply, Juliette," Mike said quietly, "and they knew you and Vince loved them as much. I know it hurts and probably will hurt for the rest of your life, but remember them always and always remember – you will see them again."

Not even Mike knew where such profound thoughts and words had come from, but he meant it, and Juliette knew he meant it. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and forced a smile.

"Thank you, Mike. And I am sure you know anyway, but Vince and I love you too, you are the second brother we always wanted."

Mike didn't blush, but nor did he know what to say. After a moment's awkwardness he just gave a weak smile and nodded.

"Come on, the prodigal one, don't let me spoil the fun. I'm OK now," said Juliette, her smile widening and the sparkle in her eyes returning.

By this time the rest of the students had backed off and were scattered around the room, some sitting, others standing, but they were unusually quiet. Mike realised that they were earwigging, hoping to latch on to any gory details from his latest adventure.

"Tell you what," said Mike to his friends, "let's go somewhere, anywhere. We'll chat along the way."

As they prepared to leave, Mike realised something was not quite right. He turned back round and began to scan the room. Unfortunately, Mike was suddenly startled by someone he was most certainly not looking for. It was Sarah Biddles, strangely away from her usual friends, staring right at Mike with a rather inane grin on her face. Unnerved by her unwavering look, Mike felt compelled to say something – anything.

"How are you, Sarah? OK?"

"Fine, thanks, Mike. Especially now that you are back again," replied the still smiling Sarah. Mike blushed, but then returned to the actual reason for the delay. . .

Leo. Where was Leo?

"Hang on. I won't be a minute."

Mike's eyes again scanned the common room. They eventually fixed on Leo, sitting at a table to the rear of the room, trying to appear nonchalant while reading a book.

"Hurry up, Leo, we haven't got all day!" shouted Mike, but Leo did not reply.

But Mike did notice that his face seemed to be trembling. Bad news from home, perhaps? Falling behind in lessons? He had to find out what was troubling his best friend so walked over and sat down by him.

"What's up, Leo?"

Leo still did not reply, but Mike saw a single tear drop onto the opened page of the book.

It took Mike less than a nanosecond to latch on to the type of things that had been happening in his absence. He looked across at Dutch and Vincent and gave them a look of thunder. The two boys avoided eye contact with Mike and held their heads down in shame.

Abigail bit her lip. All three girls were truly sympathetic, but all just helplessly shrugged their shoulders. Although Mike was not to know this, the three girls had tried their best, but it had been beyond them to put things right. Sarah, unaware of any sort of problem, still had a silly grin on her face.

Mike knew that either boy on his own could be problematic, but it was now only too obvious that they had made things more than twice as bad.

Mike turned and gave the two errant boys another look of fury, then turned back to Leo.

"Don't get upset, Leo, this will be sorted out, mate, I promise you that, OK? Whatever they have done or said to make you like this, stops today, I promise you."

"But Mike, you shouldn't be fighting my battles for me! I should have fought back! But I'm just not tough enough, even though people think I should be!" replied a tormented Leo.

"And who the blinkin' 'eck are *they* to say, what *you* should be?! Look, Leo, I don't want to go all soppy or anything, but there's loads of people who like you because you're a gentle giant, a great big cuddly teddy bear, a hug merchant, a. . . " (Mike suddenly stopped spouting toytown attributes, as Leo was looking straight at him with his eyebrows raised). "Let me ask you a question: who makes the world happier – a soldier or a poet?"

"What?!"

"Go on! Who makes the world happier, a soldier or a poet?"

"Well, a poet, I suppose, but some of them can be very depressing so it's not always that cl—"

"Shut up, Leo."

"OK."

"The point is, you are you and that is it. You're certainly good enough for me, me ole' mucker, so don't worry about them two, I'll sort them out . . . in fact, I'm going to do so right now."

Mike marched straight back over to Dutch and Vincent. "Dutch, Vince. Toilets! Now!"

"What?!" exclaimed the pair.

"You heard me! Now!"

With Leo feeling highly embarrassed but nonetheless deeply grateful, Mike frog-marched both errant boys along to the only place where privacy is guaranteed – the toilet block. There was silence in the common room as the students strained to hear the ensuing row. Curiosity got the better of the three girls and they sneaked along the corridor to listen at the door. There was nothing at first apart from sharp but unintelligible whispers, but this soon changed.

A voice suddenly boomed out from the toilets, travelled along the echoey corridor, and could even be clearly heard in the common room much to the delight of its nosy incumbents. So much for privacy.

"When are you two going to learn?! Leo is my friend, got it?! My friend! He should be your friend too, but nooooooo! Because he's quiet and knows things you don't, you two decide to gang up on him! Don't you know what it feels like to be left out? To be bullied?! Because if you don't, then I most certainly do!"

This last revelation was based purely on a black eye received from Donaldo a long while back. Minutes after this had happened, Donaldo was sporting two black eyes himself, but Mike wasn't going to spoil his own show of empathy. He stopped for a second to allow Vincent to say something, which he hoped would be an apology. It wasn't. Mike was even more infuriated.

"WHAT?! YOU'VE GOT THE CHEEK TO CALL LEO AN IDIOT?! THE ONLY IDIOT I KNOW ROUND HERE, PAL – IS YOU! You both have a choice to make. If you want to be friends of mine, this nonsense stops here and now! Understand?! You will ease up on Leo, and you will make it up to him – TODAY! So, what's it to be? Dutch?!"

"Yes, Mike, sorry, we've been stupid," said the very shame-faced Dutch.

"Vincent?!"

"Yes, Mike. We didn't really mean it, you know, but I suppose things have got out of hand. Sorry."

"Good! Let's go!"

The girls dashed back down the corridor and reassumed their earlier positions, while Sarah just smiled and whispered, "My hero".

To save the two boys any further embarrassment, Mike told them both to go on ahead. He told the girls to follow and then went back in to fetch Leo.

"Mike, two things if I may." It was Professor Winch on the telemagickeraph. "Firstly, that was quite impressive. Secondly, you do know

Professor Creek has ordered a curfew, don't you?"

Mike, as had his friends, had totally forgotten this.

"Sorry, Professor, I forgot. I would just like a few minutes alone with my friends, though, if that's OK?"

"Very well, I'll tell Ezekiel, but please don't stray towards Shadowbrooke Farm. . . I think you know why."

"Yes, Professor, thanks."

"Who were you talking to, Mike?" asked Vincent.

"Myself. It helps me think," said Mike, and tersely at that, as he still hadn't simmered down.

To the credit of both of them, Dutch and Vincent, without prompting each other or taking hints off the others, offered Leo their sincerest apologies and shook his hand. The rapidly learning Dutch went one better and gave the alleged hug merchant an embarrassed hug. Vincent hesitated, but one look at his sister settled it. She had gestured with her eyes that he hadn't quite finished, and so Vincent followed suit. That was nearly the end of the matter, but not quite. Juliette sidled over to her brother and gave him a sharp dig in the ribs with her elbow.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Because, Vincent, Mike is too much of a gentleman. As I'm certainly not a gentleman, it doesn't matter!"

"Huh! You're no lady then, either!" moaned Vincent while rubbing his side.

"Ow!" he said again.

"I suppose you're right!" said Juliette.

Abigail wished she had the license to do the same to Dutch but she thought it best not to, but she did speak up.

"You know, Dutch, you fully deserved every bit of that ear-bashing. You do know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know, I know. . . " quietly replied the still shame-faced Dutch.

What Abigail did not tell Dutch was that she had recently begun to seriously doubt the wisdom of having Jack 'Dutch' France as a close friend. She hoped and prayed there would be no reason to ever have such doubts again. And just in case you are curious to know, the future Mrs Abigail France never did.

Madeline sighed. she was just glad that Mike was back. Their valiant friend seemed to have the knack of reigniting the close friendship of the five and more recently Juliette and Vincent, but which seemed to suffer when he was not around.

The happy again group of friends reunited strolled around the village – with Mike being careful not to meander over the fields. This is something they usually did without fail – but not today.

As the years had gone by, rapid maturity had sadly seen their former group character trait of linking each other as they went about here and there during their leisure time, fade away. Mike, thinking of what he had gone through recently and with the sobering knowledge that it still wasn't over,

decided to roll back the years.

Although it was usually the girls who were the proactive linkers, as it were, Mike nevertheless slipped his arm into Madeline's.

With the others quickly catching on, it wasn't long before Hemlock Hall's own version of the Magnificent Seven were strung right across the road :

Mike – Maddie – Vince – Abbers – Dutch – Jules – Leo

'Do not forsake me, oh, my darlin'. . .'

Vincent, being a fan of the Wild West (as was Dutch of course), knew the song inside out, and Juliette had picked it up from him.

But this wasn't all. . .

Mike suddenly felt a hand slip through his left arm; he immediately thought it was Sarah, but it wasn't, it was Hyacinth Molyneaux. The seven had been spotted by Tobias and his gang from the common room window. It has to be noted here: there was no frostiness or snooty cliquishness between the two groups of friends; they all liked each other very much, and the others upon seeing the five-now-seven reprise their former routine, had automatically wanted to join in. With a prompt from Tobias, they had all dashed out of the common room, clattered down the staircase and raced out of the main door.

Professor Creek, who had drawn the short straw and had returned to school after only having time to throw half a glass of shandy down his neck and take one bite of a small sausage roll, was on door duty. This was to try and prevent the very thing that Tobias and his close pals had just done. He had been about to shout after them and demand they do an about-turn and come right back in. However, he stopped, sighed, and picked up a newspaper from the rack to the left of the main door.

Hyacinth, of course, had beaten Sarah to Mike, but it was only in fun. She squeezed Mike's arm and looked down the line and waved to Sarah.

So :

Luke – Sarah – Tobias – Adam – Hyacinth –Mike –
Maddie – Vince –Abbers – Dutch – Jules – Leo

'. . .I do not know what fate awaits me. . .'

Mike smiled. Obviously, the others had learned the song many years before, most probably through listening to (and perhaps unavoidably) the five's high pitched warblings.

There was also something else. As Mike was a brilliant mathematics student, he had quickly realised that although Tobias and co. could all link each other in a boy-girl fashion when by themselves, an extra girl would be needed to maintain the pattern along the line of the extended gang of High-Nooners. There wasn't one.

Mike looked down the row and saw Adam and Tobias linking each other – at first – but then Adam quickly pulled his arm away and put it behind his back. Mike smiled again.

Just as the theme from the classic film '*High Noon*' came to an end, Holly dashed up to them all to join in, thus solving the Adam and Tobias problem. And on they all went, singing any old song they could think of.

As there was precious little room to properly accommodate a straight line of now thirteen young people right across the road, there was, with much laughter, a great deal of squashing up, swapping to near-crocodile fashion when the lane narrowed, and then a hasty reforming when the road widened again at certain points.

They were back at the school entrance. As Tobias's gang and Holly broke away, Mike shivered as each lingered a little longer than normal. They ruffled his hair and patted his arm, there was a hug here and a squeeze there; and there was slightly prolonged eye contact showing somewhat sad faces.

It was obvious to Mike that his strange comings and goings had had the knock-on effect of setting the rumour mill in motion. And, thought Mike, Chinese whispers had most probably ensued resulting in the basic rumour which was, perhaps, somewhere near the truth, morphing into something totally different.

Tobias, lingering a moment more and whispering, "Good luck in Patagonia, Mike," added weight to this possibility.

"Blimey," said Mike, quietly to himself.

The addition of the other five then six had helped in one way, preventing any further awkward questions from his own close friends. After the departure of Tobias and his gang, Mike steeled himself to remain in enforced cautious mode, resigning and readying himself to yet again imparting mostly flubber with just a few snippets of truth.

Despite the prolonged diversion, it seemed as if Dutch had been biding his time still.

"So, it was a grudge match?!"

"Yeah, 'fraid so."

"Wow!"

Thankfully this was not followed up.

They all trooped back up to the common room, and although Mike was dreading yet another noisy inquisition from the rest of the Camelot students, he need not have worried. Just as they entered the room, Professor Ezekiel Creek swept in right behind them and asked for silence from everyone.

"I have some rather surprising news for all of you, and some of you – although not all (glancing at Dutch and Vincent) – will be upset to hear it. Through circumstances beyond our control, the school is being closed down and you will all have to leave for home – early this afternoon."

At first there was a shocked silence to Ezekiel's comments, but this soon became a cacophony of noise with pupils demanding to know why such a terrible thing had happened. Ezekiel disregarded their protests and again

demanded silence.

"Do not worry, children. This is not permanent and we hope you can all return in a few weeks, maybe sooner if we are lucky. Another important thing I have to tell you is, all magic travel has been suspended for the – er – duration. However, I have been able to make suitable alternative travel arrangements for you all. Those of you who are not familiar with non-magic forms of travel and transport, have been teamed up with those who are.

"The prefects will be around shortly with letters for each of you. These will contain travel itineraries, tickets, and letters for your parents or guardians. Please, children, no more questions. Pack up your things and be ready to go by twelve forty-five. Thank you."

As he turned to go, he whispered to Mike to follow him out into the corridor.

"You can help your friends pack, Mike, and then you can have lunch with them, but you must be at the farm by one o'clock, OK? See you later."

Mike once more returned to the common room and yet again his friends commenced a bombardment of questions.

"Are you sure you've told us everything?" asked Madeline.

"It's wolf-whales, isn't it? The school's going to be attacked by wolf-whales. I knew it!" hoped Vincent.

"Come on, Mike, you can tell us! We're your friends!" said Dutch.

Mike sighed. What should he tell them?

"Look, you're right, there is something going on, here and at Krickenstaltz, but I just can't tell you exactly what it is, it wouldn't be right. OK?"

Leo, knowing he owed Mike some gratitude, immediately converted it to latitude and dutifully did not pursue the matter. Dutch initially thought about pursuing the matter but then thought better of it. Vincent was very definitely going to pursue the matter, but one look at his sister's face made him think again.

"We understand, Mike," said Abigail, "don't we?"

The others all nodded their heads and Mike breathed a sigh of relief.

The atmosphere was noisy and business-like as all the students began to-ing and fro-ing between the common room and the dormitories. They packed up their belongings and stacked them against the sidewall, ready for the off.

A few minutes later, the prefects brought round the letters outlining the situation, complete with timetables and tickets for their journeys.

Ellen's suggested day-trips had become promised weekend stays at the Morses' house for Dutch, Leo, Abigail and Madeline. The girls hugged each other, ruffled the boys' hair and shouted with glee. All read their letters again to make sure there had been no mistake.

"Nope – no mistake! And I'm coming too!"

It was Ellen, standing in the doorway. Everyone bar Vincent was delighted to hear this and rushed to greet their friend.

"Come on, Vince, I'm not that bad, am I?" pleaded Ellen, but smiling with it.

"Nah, I suppose not," replied Vincent, who duly gave his domestic enemy a rather sterile hug.

"Erm – do any of you know if the Morse boys are around? Their mum and dad said it would be an idea to introduce myself before I nick one of their bedrooms," asked Ellen.

As Mike was the only one who actually knew them, he was about to say they might be too busy at the moment to call in, but he had no need.

"Hello, hello, this place still smells of old socks," said Ted, breezing into the common room, quickly followed by his brother, Franky.

Mike's friends as well as the rest of the Camelot students looked curiously at the two strangers.

"You must be Ellen," said Franky, shaking Ellen's hand. "Never mind this place, Ted's room stinks of far more than old socks. Make sure you nab mine!"

"You cheeky so and so!" retorted Ted. "But alas, my younger brother is right – however, I prefer to call it the exotic aroma of the proud adventurer. Hello, by the way, I'm Ted," and he too shook Ellen's hand. "I think I've met you once before. I think it was in the 1500s, and you were riding around Coventry on a horse with nowt on. Remember?" said an outrageous Ted.

To uproarious laughter right around the common room, Ellen blushed but also laughed out loud at such comic wickedness.

"Yes, your mum and dad are right, you are a couple of flamin' headcases! But I'm pleased to meet you."

Thankfully for Ellen, the boys turned their attention to Mike.

"And here he is! The greatest champion this school has ever seen since King Arthur himself! Some show today, Mike. That sod taught me as well, but I never managed to put one on him like you did. Bravo!" said Ted.

"Yeah, well done! I wish I could have sent him for a mud bath. Still, I nicked all his carrots once . . . which was fun. I even left false rabbit prints and old Corny spent days building a fence," said Franky.

"And what happened then?" asked Mike.

"Nicked all his onions . . . we'd better be off. Coming, Ted?"

"Yup! Let's get to it."

The supposed clandestine Ted and Franky went off to take part in a top secret mission, or a mopping up operation, as their equally clandestine father had described it.

Mike and his friends trooped off to have their final lunch at Hemlock Hall before the school was closed, or to be more accurate, evacuated before Zenith and his cronies arrived to do battle.

At 12:45 p.m. a number of very confused and even scared looking coach drivers pulled up at the school entrance. The drivers all got out to help the children and staff pack their luggage, and to try and find someone to pay them.

Two of the drivers struck up a conversation.

"'Ere, Bert, this is spookin' me out good style. I'se lived 'n' worked these

parts for over thirty years, and I ain't never seen or even 'eard o' this place before."

"Yeah, Davy, I knows what yer mean. Mind you, I believe in them vampires and trolls 'n' fings, so's me Mrs. Blimey! Look over there! What'd I tell ya?"

As Bert and Davy looked across, they were surprised and even a little scared to see a rather large man with huge arm muscles chasing a sheep all over the place.

Maisy the sheep had slipped out of the unlocked sheepfold and had dashed over the road and into the forge, almost coming to a squidgy end as Jez was hammering out a new grill for the huge fireplace in the Glastonbury Hotel.

Maisy had made good her escape by squeezing through the blacksmith's legs and scrambling out of the back door, and was soon away down the road with Jez in hot pursuit.

"Don't be alarmed, gentlemen, that's just our blacksmith. He's perfectly harmless, I assure you."

It was Professor Winch. He had followed on from Krickenstaltz and was here to check on the en masse departure. The two drivers felt a little easier as they saw Jez finally catch Maisy. They watched the gentle giant pick her up and kiss her on the head, and bring her back and gently place her in the sheepfold. Jez then disappeared into the forge.

"Damn coach drivers! Sorry, Belle, that's your Sunday lunch up the spout!" came the shout from the forge.

"Ahem! Right then, gentlemen, time to settle up. You asked for three-hundred pounds each for the journey? Here's five-hundred pounds apiece. Let's say it's our gratitude for your – er – confidentiality. . . ?"

"Wiv yer, guv, wiv yer – no probs," said Bert, while Davy just winked, tapped his nose and pocketed the money, as did the other drivers.

The whole school was ready to go.

After Mike had commenced saying goodbye to all his friends, he became very embarrassed to find the rest of his Irregular unit all stood watching and whooping and cheering. This was as they witnessed all five girls (Sarah was determined not to miss out), kissing Mike on the cheek, giving him hugs and ruffling his hair.

Dutch and Vincent had decided to add their own inimitable touch by going into a heart-broken sweethearts forced apart routine. They both leaned out of the door of the coach and pretended to cry. Dutch really hammed it up by placing one hand on his forehead and one on his heart. He actually fell out of the coach due to the lack of a third hand, but he stoically got straight back up and carried on.

"Oh the pain! Parting is such sweet sorrow! Until we meet again, my sweet!"

Vincent blew a kiss and flung a hastily pulled bunch of autumn wallflowers (complete with soily roots) at Mike. As they landed at Mike's feet, an infuriated Harry Gripweed shook his fists at the troublesome boys.

As the coaches roared away, the good natured Harry Gripweed burst out laughing. This was despite earlier being told of the dangers that faced the whole village. It had been put to Harry and the other villagers and proprietors, that they too could be evacuated along with the students, but each and every one had elected to stay – and fight if necessary.

It was time to learn how to ride Lithuanian Warrior Dragons.

The Irregulars walked out of the school and over the fields, and soon reached the clearing on the far edge of Shadowbrooke Farm. Here there were six huge dragons, each one strongly tethered to a tree.

They were far bigger dragons than most of the Irregulars had ever seen before, and even bigger than the rest had feared they were going to be. Their scales were raised at an angle far more than usual, giving their hides a pineappley look. Their wings were nearly the twice the size of the common or garden variety.

As the nervous group looked on in awe, one of the dragons opened his wings to try and get rid of a number of small airborne parasites. As the dragon was side on to the Irregulars, they nearly got swept to the ground as the wing fully extended, coming to rest just short of where they were all standing. There was a scream from the ladies, and from Gregor. He went very red indeed as he was immediately mocked by the others.

Franky thought it timely to introduce their guest tutor.

"Listen up, everyone! This is our tutor for today, none other than the world famous dragon trainer – Denzil Moriarty."

Denzil was a tall, fair haired man with a ruddy complexion. He wore a beige coloured shirt, jeans, cowboy boots and a stetson hat.

"Howdy, folks! Everyone ready?!"

Despite the affected howdy!, he was not an American, but hailed from Wigan in Lancashire. There was an assortment of grunts, vague nods of the head, and one "As ready as we'll ever be".

"Good enough!" replied Denzil. "Just gather round in a semi-circle, that's it. There are things I have to explain and show you, even before you try and ride one of these dragons.

"As you have no doubt noticed, the Lithuanian Warrior Dragon is a good deal larger than your average Joe and Gerty dragons from Wales, or most other places for that matter. However, this should not present any major problems."

There were unconvinced looks from the trainees.

"Please look over to the dragons if you would. The first thing you will notice is how different the middle of the back is at the top compared with the rest of its scaly hide. Here there are no scales, and instead there is a very thick membrane. This is incredibly tough but surprisingly comfortable for the rider, and this is why there is never any need for a saddle when riding these beasts."

At this point, one of the dragons snorted to blow away the midges gathered in its nostrils. This was harmless, but sounded anything but.

"Don't worry, folks. They have a constant problem with parasites – they've tickled his nose and he's sneezed, that's all.

"Now where was I? Oh, yes. As for safely getting up on top, caution and confidence is a must. Out of instinct these dragons react badly to fear, similar to some dogs, I suppose. You must not only look confident when you approach them, but really be confident. If they sense that you are afraid of them, they may roar and snap, and well – er – we'll cover that later. . . "

The already unconvinced Irregulars once again seriously doubted the wisdom of the plan.

"As for commanding a Lithuanian Warrior Dragon, this is done by using reins as you would a horse, so you'll probably be up and away in no time, eh, Gregor?"

Gregor smiled grimly. In his mind the only possible similarity between horses and dragons were the reins.

"As they are warrior dragons and have seen a considerable amount of combat, they are of course fully trained up to recognise any commands given by its rider. However, there is no way that I would let any of you up in the air until you have some idea of how to issue commands by using the reins; to let you fly today without such basic instruction would be criminally negligent on my part. So. . . "

Denzil went behind one of the trees, but reappeared seconds later, dragging behind him some badly put together contraption. This rather novel construction was made of wood and plastic and held together by rope.

" . . . Here's one I prepared earlier! OK, folks, this is a mock-up of a Lithuanian Warrior Dragon. I know it doesn't look much but it will suit our purposes. This is the head. (Denzil pointed to a plastic bucket at one end of the cobbled frame and gave it a quick jiggle; this was to laughs from most of the Irregulars). And as you can see, these are the reins. (He picked them up and did an unconvincing "Yaargh! Yaargh!" to a few minor chuckles from the gathering). Yes, well, these are the reins.

"Ok, let's move on. For those of you who haven't yet cottoned on as to what is to come next, then the idea is for you all to take turns on the mock-up. This is so you can learn all the moves I can teach you in the short time we have. So – who's first? Any volunteers. . . ?"

Denzil noticed that the very two he did not want to volunteer just yet had immediately raised their hands. Denzil looked at Big Bill Dooley, then Jez, and then back to the rather insecure frame. He pretended he had not seen either of them. Thankfully, Mike had also raised his arm.

"Good lad, Micky . . . sorry, what's that? Oh – er – Mike! On you get! Good! First of all, take the reins, that's it. For those who have never ridden either a dragon or even a horse, you will at least have seen many of the old cowboy films. So it's probably patently obvious that to move either left or right, you tug the reins to either the left or the right – agreed?"

Everyone nodded, even Professor Cornstone, although he also muttered something about not being idiots.

"Pardon, Professor?" asked Denzil.

"Nothing, nothing," sighed Professor Cornstone.

"Sorry, could have sworn you said something. OK, Mike, a few times if you would, please. I know you'll feel daft, and you look it as well! But remember, it's their turn next! That's it, smashin'!" said Denzil in an exaggerated Cockney accent.

"'Ere! You cheeky so and so!" retorted Big Bill, but he was joking.

"So – on to ups, downs, and rolls and loops. The ups and downs are quite easy, really. If you are taking off, then you pull the reins towards you and up. That's it, Mike, spot on. If you are already in the air then the dragon knows it means to go higher. Down is a little tricky I suppose, but only at first. What you do is, drop the reins down both sides and pull towards you, but keeping it even. If you do this correctly the dragon will start to drop in height, a little like an aeroplane. If you do this at speed, the dragon's snout will dip and you will soon be nose-diving, which is useful when either attacking or evading an enemy.

"Now should you either wish to ascend at an angle, or even descend at an angle but without the drama of a true nose-dive, just slightly angle the reins when pulling them to you. Unfortunately, only riding on the real thing can help you perfect this, but it doesn't take long. Just go as far you can on the frame, like our young friend here. That's it, Mike.

"Now, rolls and loops. Rolls are all to do with criss-crossing the reins, but many people get caught out with this. So let's see what you all know. If you criss-cross the reins left over right and then pull straight towards you, what direction will the dragon roll?"

There was a chorus of "Left!" from all of the gathering.

"Sorry, folks! Catches 'em all out that does. It's actually to the right!"

There were chuckles from those who don't mind in the least at having to stand corrected, but a look of embarrassment (and hidden fury) from Professor Cornstone.

"OK, simmer down, gang. Just remember this simple little ditty, 'Left over right, go right, right over left, go left!' OK?

"Now, onto the loop, or to give it its traditional name, the Loop-de-Loop. This is achieved by a really sharp tug of the reins towards you and then an equally sharp right or left, depending whether you wish to do a forward or a backward loop.

"As these particular historical commands of time immemorial are not linked to directional guidance, and as they are of the finest subtlety, you will have to tighten the rein around the dragon's neck. Don't worry, this won't hurt the dragon, their necks are even thicker than Big Bill's. ("Ere!" –"Only joking!") If you don't, the dragon will not understand the subtle differences between the commands, and you may find yourselves rolling rather than looping, and you could end up being flung straight off his back, or worse.

" . . . Try that as far as you can if you would, Mike, good stuff. A few more times . . . Great!"

Denzil immediately regretted saying, "or worse", as he was immediately bombarded with pleas to clarify 'worse'. With a wholly unconvincing further retort of, "I was only joking", he continued.

"But that's not quite all. The rolls and loops need a few extra actions which are actually nothing to do with commanding the dragon, but are for your own safety. I'm sure you can see these two pieces of card I've stuck to the side of the frame – yes? These depict the two quite flexible but very strong flaps of skin just beneath the dragon's ears. When rolling or looping you must first dig your heels into the dragon's side – don't worry, it won't hurt."

"Us or the dragon?!" half-joked Estella.

"The dragon, silly. Now then, before you roll or loop, grab hold of these flaps and only these flaps. This brings me to the most important point of all: never, ever grab – or even touch the ears of a Lithuanian Warrior Dragon."

"Why not?" asked Gregor.

"Just don't! OK, Mike, you've looked the fool long enough, it's your turn for a bit of fun. Who's next?"

The other Irregulars commenced their dummy run atop of the wooden frame and plastic bucket.

As most of the nervous Irregulars each took their turn, Franky diplomatically struck up a conversation with Big Bill and Jez to ensure they went last. This centred on the one thing that he knew both men liked a great deal – beer.

Mike did indeed laugh, at least at most of the others, however, he had no reason at all to laugh at Professor Cornstone. The seasoned campaigner went through all the moves perfectly as if it was for real, and totally oblivious to his fellow trainees.

It soon became obvious that one of the Irregulars would not finish the training nor even start, this was Agnes. Although she did not want to make a fuss, she couldn't take it any longer and burst into tears. This was immediately noticed by her good friends Florence and Jacinta, who dashed across to comfort her. They did not ask her what the matter was, they already knew.

"I'm sorry, girls, I'm sorry, everyone. I really am too old for all of this, and I haven't been very well at all lately."

Jacinta shook her head and whispered to herself, "Where's Professor Winch when you need him?"

"Hello, ladies, if I may?"

It was Professor Winch. He had turned up primarily to check on progress, but he had also immediately become aware of the problem at hand. He put his arm around Mrs Pollett and suggested they go for a walk.

It wasn't long at all before Professor Winch was back – without Agnes.

"Ah, good, good. First phase nearly over, eh? Very good, very good. Now, I'm sorry to put a dampener on things, but I have some sad news for you all. After talking things over with Agnes, it would appear that retirement is the only practical option for her. I am sure you will be glad and relieved to hear

that our good friend has already left for home to take a well-deserved rest. Agnes has served this community faithfully for many years, and we will have to arrange a fitting send-off for her sometime in the near future."

"Hear, hear!" said both a highly relieved Jacinta and Florence.

Josh began to cry, and he didn't stop there. He took it upon himself to strike up a hearty rendition of the Magic Anthem.

"From the. . ."

Professor Winch sighed; this wasn't the right time.

"Josh, I don't think this is an appropriate . . . oh well. . . '. . . Erin the Green. . .'"

The whole crew could do nothing but do as their boss had done and yield to Josh's patriotism.

After this impromptu version of the Magic Anthem had come to an end, Professor Winch said a rushed goodbye and hurried back to the school to make some urgent calls.

Denzil rallied the troops once more.

"OK, everyone, let's not fall behind now.

"Right . . . the moves all of you have gone through thus far on the mock-up, while vital in order for you to be safe when actually in the air, will soon seem to pale away into insignificance. This is when the very real situation some of you will soon be in is brought into the equation. With this in mind, there is something else you need to learn and you will need to learn it quickly, both on the mock-up and when actually riding a dragon. Can anyone think what this is? To give you a clue, even though it's the last thing you'll feel like doing, please think of what lies ahead . . . anyone. . . ?

The mystified and bemused Irregulars all frowned, though this was through deep thought rather than annoyance. There was nothing from any of them, until. . .

"OH MY GOD!"

"Yes, Estella?" softly replied Denzil, while her comrades turned to look at Ezzie after having been shocked out of their own reveries. " . . . We're fighting, and. . ."

"Yes, go on. . . "

"HOW THE HELL CAN WE FIRE OFF A WAND, WHEN OUR HANDS ARE ON THE REINS?!"

"BINGO!"

Denzil had not meant to sound so enthusiastic in his reply, but he just couldn't help it.

"That is correct, Estella. Fighting an airborne battle from the back of a dragon, is not the same as a Sunday afternoon jaunt over the skies of Glastonbury on Midsummer's Day. At the very least, you will need to be able to control the dragon one-handed, while at the same time fire a battle-wand in earnest. The most professional of our forces, as well as the best teams in the Empires League, can of course ride dragons, or broomsticks, without using their hands at all.

"However, the plain reality is, we cannot expect this from most of you in the very short time we have. The closest some of you will have ever come to being in this situation, is when playing in a game of Empires at school level. So you should be ok, eh, Mike?"

This was followed by a smile and a wink from the dragon trainer.

Mike did not reply, instead he just blushed and put his head down. He wasn't sure if Denzil had made a hidden euphemistic reference to the earlier grudge match, or if it wa sindeed just a friendly bit of banter, but any reference to any type of airborne duelling at the moment was just too uncomfortable.

Denzil sensed the awkwardness and realised he had made a faux pas of some sort. He decided it was prudent to move on as quickly as possible.

"OK, Mike, if you would please, back on, that's it. Oh, and here we are. . ."

As Mike climbed back on the mock-up, Denzil handed him a wand. The dragon trainer then turned to the rest of the trainees and issued wands to them also.

"Yes, yes, I know you all have your own, but these are Training Wands which have been especially formulated by the WSS. No questions now, all will become clear soon enough. . .

"Now, Mike I want you to do two things: firstly, issue each command you have learned, but stop after each one. Then – just do whatever it takes to aim your wand at the nearest tree and utter the incantation – *'ARBOREO FLAMOSO!'* After that and as quick as you can, pick up the free rein again with your wand hand, and then stop.

"The best advice I can give is this: try and speed up as you move on to each command. By the end, hopefully, you will be issuing the commands and firing the wand so fast, to anyone watching it will all seem instantaneous."

Through a combination of nerves, self-consciousness and trying something new, Mike fumbled his way through this part of the training – at first.

However, Mike soon realised that after time and after many repeats, he could rapidly swap to holding the reins in one hand and fire off the specially formulated battle-wand with the other, with hardly a discernible lapse in time. Once or twice he even managed to fire off his wand while still holding the separate reins as normal, but this was the rare exception and not the rule.

Eventually, Mike was able to control the reins and fire off the battle-wand far faster and more consistently than he had managed to do at the start of the session. However, it wasn't all plain sailing.

Mike's wand fire, though rapid, had not been accurate at all. He had managed to incinerate a bush which just happened to be dangerously near to his friends, and had scorched the earth all around, but he had not yet hit a tree as requested by Denzil. But the determined young fighter was not going to give up.

Mike adjusted the reins to show he meant to bank left. He swiftly raised his wand, screwed up his face in total concentration, aimed the wand at the

nearest tree and yelled *'ARBOREO FLAMOSO!'* With a tremendous bang, the tree erupted into an inferno of red, yellow and orange flame.

Mike was relieved and his friends were delighted, as was Denzil.

To a further eruption of noise, which was thankfully just his pals urging him on, Mike went right through all the commands he could think of again and again; and again and again whatever tree he aimed at seemingly burst into flames.

Denzil whistled and pointed at his watch. This was to indicate that Mike's stint on the mock-up had come to an end. Mike climbed off, feeling as if he had really been up in the air.

The rest of the Irregulars were then put through their paces on the new and improved mock-up training.

As was to be expected, Professor Cornstone, Ernst and Gregor ignited the trees relatively easily, so did Big Bill and Estella. Josh wasn't too bad, but the rest varied between fair and poor.

The dummy run, or the first phase as Professor Winch had called it, was over. The two big men had finally been given their go, with the end result being one totally wrecked mock-up dragon, with bits of broken wood and a bent plastic bucket lying in a heap on the ground.

With what was to come next looming large in the minds of the Irregulars, the first phase now seemed to have been on par with one of those jolly summer jaunts across the blue skies of Glastonbury mentioned by Denzil earlier on.

"Ok, folks! We've reached the moment you've all been waiting for. You are all going to ride a real, live, Lithuanian Warrior Dragon," said a grim-faced Denzil, followed by visible gulps from all of the Irregulars.

"Who's for going first, then?" asked Denzil, far from hopeful of getting an answer in the affirmative.

"I will!" said Big Bill Dooley, surprising everybody. "OK then!" replied Denzil.

The trainer went over to the dragons. He untied the first one and slowly led it back over to the Irregulars.

"Now I should have mentioned this earlier, but please remember that all warrior dragons have names which they do indeed all recognise," continued Denzil. "This one is called Tarquin. OK, big fella – carefully approach Tarquin and climb up."

Big Bill amazed the entire company.

Showing supreme confidence in his task, Bill slowly but purposefully walked up to Tarquin. He offered a cheery greeting, remembering of course to throw in the dragon's name, and patted the dragon on the side and confidently climbed up onto his back.

With a perfect take off, Big Bill and Tarquin were off the ground, with Tarquin opening his wings and flapping them rapidly but evenly to quickly gain height and momentum. Bill used the reins like an expert, and had no problem whatsoever with getting Tarquin to do all the moves they had all

practiced earlier on the mock-up.

Dragon and rider soared higher and higher.

Bill gave the commands for Tarquin to do a fantastic series of rolls and loops, followed by a nose-dive at great speed. They swooped and soared, astounding the spectators even more due to Bill's hitherto hidden knowledge of how to utilise the wing functions of a warrior dragon. With quite complex rein movements, Big Bill commanded Tarquin to spread his wings, then half close them, and then tightly tuck them back into his side.

In addition to the succession of highly complex manoeuvres, trees were igniting left right and centre.

Even Denzil was envious, as many of the moves made by Big Bill had not even been considered for the training session. If the Irregulars had been astounded so far, this was nothing to what came next.

Big Bill did yet another complex movement with the reins and soon both he and Tarquin were flying upside down.

The trouble with Big Bill Dooley is, when he knows he is on to a good thing it then becomes too much of a good thing.

Bill commanded Tarquin to restore equilibrium and soon they were both upright once more. Despite being quite high in the sky, he could see and even hear his friends shouting, waving and cheering at his magnificent aerobatic display. He grinned and waved down at the Irregulars. This was also to do a bit of showing off and fly one-handed, further embellishing the airborne spectacle.

When Bill realised he was veering off a little, he put his free hand back on the rein. Unfortunately, this was at the same time as an air pocket caused a touch of turbulence, making Tarquin career to the left. Bill instinctively reached out to hold on to one of the flaps, but he missed it entirely and instead ended up grabbing the dragon's left ear.

Tarquin roared and turned his head right around and lunged straight at Big Bill. As Tarquin roared again, Big Bill screamed and leaned right back as far as he could, just as Tarquin snapped his jaws. The dragon's mouth, containing a multitude of huge razor sharp teeth, had snapped shut less than an inch away from Bill's face.

Bill breathed a sigh of relief, he thought he'd got away with it. Wrong. Tarquin lifted his head right back and roared yet again. Big Bill recognised that this time, Tarquin was going to breathe fire. With split-second timing, Bill yet again went upside down, but this time without Tarquin. He rolled over and under while pressing hard against Tarquin's sides. Bill's legs were sticking up in the air although bowed tightly over the dragon's body to help him stay airborne. There was an almighty blast of fire from Tarquin's mouth. The dragon flame burned right into Bill's trousers, singeing his legs.

Bill did not now have one single leg hair remaining.

Despite Bill's screaming and hollering, Tarquin's fury now seemed to be well and truly vented.

Big Bill forced himself back into an upright position and patted Tarquin on

the side by way of apology. His shocked friends on the ground were very relieved to find that Bill had regained control and had successfully commanded Tarquin to land.

A relieved Big Bill Dooley dismounted. He handed the reins back to Denzil and rejoined his fellow Irregulars.

"Phew! Fort I'd had it there for a min'! Still, all in one piece, I fink. Oooh, me legs," said Big Bill, hobbling along.

Denzil quickly surveyed the countenance of the big man and decided to crack on, although the concentration of some of his trainees had been broken.

"Poor fella, let me look at you. Ooh, that's nasty," said Florence, "best call in on Trixie later on."

Denzil saw that apart from being minus his leg hairs, Bill wasn't that badly hurt.

"Bill is fine, everyone, although I couldn't have wished for a better example of why you shouldn't touch the ears of these type of dragons! (Bill was too busy wallowing in the sympathy of the ladies to hear this). "If we can crack on?" suggested Denzil. "Who's next?"

Mike had come to the conclusion that if something bad was going to happen to him, it may as well be sooner rather than later.

"Me!"

"OK, Mike, good lad. Just hang on a mo."

Denzil, after having already retethered Tarquin, then brought across a dragon called Melvyn.

Mike was troubled straightaway.

Tarquin had seemed placid from start to finish, apart from Bill's transgression, but Melvyn most certainly wasn't. He was snorting, breathing out small jets of fire, and not too willing to be the centre of everyone's attention.

"Don't worry, folks, he's just a bit tired but he's no danger," said Denzil.

"D'ya know, you could sell leeks to the Welsh!" laughed Josh, but it was a hollow laugh.

Mike, forgetting all that he had been told earlier, was very obviously a bag of nerves as he approached Melvyn. The dragon looked at Mike with a sly sideways glance, and snorted. Mike's heart jumped, but he persevered.

Mike placed his hand on Melvyn's side hoping he somehow had Big Bill's special gift – it soon seemed as if he did not. Melvyn lifted his head and turned and roared at Mike. Thankfully this was not accompanied by a blast of fire. Mike shouted and jumped back, and looked to Denzil for support and advice.

"Easy, Mike," said Denzil, "he knows you're scare– er – nervous. Just compose yourself and try again. It'll be OK. Trust me."

"Why? Are you a doctor?!" retorted Mike.

"No, he isn't! But I am!" joked Ernst.

"Well don't go far!" shouted the still nervous but sporting Mike.

"And I'll fetch that vicar!" added Josh.

As the rest of the Irregulars roared with laughter, Denzil piped up to get things back on track.

"Come on, Mike, there's no time to waste. Just imagine he's a broomstick, that should do the trick."

"Oh yeah, that'll be a great help!" replied Mike, sarcastically.

But Mike duly obliged andyet again approached Melvyn, deliberately putting a spring in his step and looking confident. This time, Mike was pleasantly surprised to find Melvyn totally amenable.

"Hello, Melvyn," said Mike, matter-of-factly, (although he wasn't feeling quite as unconcerned as that in his mind).

Mike patted the dragon on the side and then climbed up on to his back.

Mike's nerves vanished, and just like Big Bill, he went on to deftly manage the reins as if he was a seasoned pro' rather than an absolute novice. Melvyn immediately responded by spreading his wings.

They were airborne.

The Irregulars looked up and were ecstatic.

Just like the big man, Mike dipped, soared, rolled, looped, swooped and more besides, especially setting a great many trees on fire. His friends hollered and cheered every move. Even Professor Cornstone showed rare enthusiasm, shouting verbal encouragement and clapping, although he could not quite manage to lose dignity and abandon stuffy decorum by joining in with the unfettered vocal approval of the cheap seats.

Although Mike had decided against a rodeoistic one-handed display of aerobatics, he thought it would be a good idea to try both types of upside down flying.

After rapidly going through his mind what he at least hoped had been the moves made by Big Bill, both with his feet as well as the reins, Mike, with butterflies in his stomach, adjusted the reins to give the command. Melvyn duly obliged, and seconds later both dragon and rider were flying upside down. Knowing not to take any chances, Mike immediately dug his feet in and bowed his legs tight over Melvyn's back to gain extra adhesion.

After fully circling once over the clearing, Mike effortlessly put himself and Melvyn back upright.

While holding on to the right-sided rein with both hands, Mike then slid down the dragon's side and went right underneath his belly. He then reached up with his right hand to grab the free rein, while at the same time digging his feet in and bowing his legs even closer and tighter than before. This was to ensure he was even more firmly adhered to Melvyn.

Mike knew not to attempt any further complicated manoeuvres from this position, so just allowed Melvyn to fly straight on for fifty yards or so. Mike then corrected himself without any problem at all.

Upon spotting Denzil waving to indicate time was up, Mike took the opportunity to take Melvyn into one final high-speed nose-dive, and at the same time seemingly reduce an eight-hundred year old oak tree to cinders

as he flew by.

As they neared the ground, Mike used the reins to pull up and level out, and made a perfect landing within two feet of where he'd taken off.

The Irregulars stood and applauded, and cheered even louder and longer than they had for Bill.

"Way to go, Mike!" enthused Estella. "Only hope I'm still alive after my go, never mind all those manoeuvres!"

"Exceptional, Miller, exceptional!"

Surprisingly, this was Professor Cornstone, who, although still couldn't fully let go, certainly let Mike know he was highly impressed. Mike beamed, not so much because of the adulation, but because he was still in one piece.

As the ladies all ruffled his hair and the men still sang his praises, Gregor, who like Mike had come to the conclusion, why delay the inevitable?, stepped forward. And after all, Mike had stuttered at the start, so he should be OK – he hoped. . .

Melvyn was retethered to one of the trees, and the next dragon out was called Jack. His full name was 'Fiery Jack', but Denzil thought it prudent not to give him his full title in public.

Gregor walked up to the dragon, or more accurately stumbled up to it. He was absolutely terrified. Before proceedings could be halted, the profusely sweating and trembling Gregor reached Jack, but he somehow got his legs tangled and he tripped and fell. As he lay there sprawled on the ground, he made a desperate attempt to hoist himself up by reaching out with his left arm to grab the branches of a tree, just to Jack's left. Unfortunately he missed entirely, and ended up giving a very hard pull on Jack's ear. The aggrieved warrior dragon roared, lunged at Gregor and released a fireball, which Gregor only just avoided by rolling to his right while still prone. But that was not all. Jack was that furious he strained and broke away from his tethering.

Gregor scrambled to his feet, screamed, and ran as far away as possible with Jack very soon in pursuit.

The only thing in Gregor's favour was that as agile as a Lithuanian Warrior Dragon is in the air, they cannot run very fast, but he could certainly reach Gregor with a salvo of fireballs.

Gregor continued to scream and run all over the clearing, holding his rapidly reddening backside.

Denzil and some of the others gave chase with ropes, but the situation had rapidly become critical. Denzil could sense and even see that Jack was preparing to make a flying jump; this would allow the fire-breathing beast with razor-sharp claws to swoop right down on top of his target.

"Hey! Hey! Yaaargh! Yaaargh! Hey!" shouted Denzil, while waving his arms wildly. It worked.

Jack stopped and turned to face Denzil and his dragonboys. In the spilt-second it had taken for the dragon to turn, the ropes were thrown and Jack was trapped.

Fiery Jack struggled of course, but his snout was now tightly strapped up and his wings were secured firmly to his sides. Denzil and his posse had saved the day, and of course, Gregor. By this time Gregor's backside was badly singed, but luckily for him it could easily have been far worse. The Hemlock Hall cowboys soon had the stallion back in the corale and calm returned to the gathering.

The remainder were all put through their paces on the other dragons. Through rotation and with the odd numbers involved, some came out more than once, apart from Jack. There were varying degrees of success among the others, including a slightly confusing scenario whereby some would fly poorly but looked as if they could start a forest fire at the North Pole, yet others would be the proverbial damp squibs and yet fly as if they were born with wings.

However, there were no more major incidents to either amuse or worry the Irregulars. The training session was over.

Denzil, after lifting the enchantments off the much seemingly incinerated trees (but which now looked even greener than before), once more asked the Irregulars to gather in a semi-circle.

It had been a long, tiring day, and as it had thankfully remained dry they all sat on the grass, apart from Gregor who said he preferred to stand at the moment.

The trainer smiled and addressed the Irregulars.

"Thanks to all of you, you all worked very hard today, although I'm sure that you are all mightily glad to have got that out of the way. Now, a few important points from today's session.

"Firstly, Fier – er – Jack is being withdrawn. I think I made a wrong choice there, too volatile . . .

"Er – another thing is . . . (he looked apologetic as he spoke) Gregor, it's not your thing at all, this, is it. . . ?" Gregor blushed, but could not disagree and shook his head.

"And finally, just to remind you: the final decision on who will ride the dragons for real, will be made by Professor Winch. I will make my recommendations to him, of course, and he will be briefing you all on this and all other developments later on.

"So – that's it from me, unless there are any questions? . . . No? . . . Then I suggest we decamp and go and get some well-earned chow. Agreed?"

As would be expected, there was hearty agreement to this and all were about to indeed decamp, but Estella then delayed proceedings for a few moments.

"People, people! Have you forgotten your manners?! How about a round of applause for the excellent tuition we received today?!"

The Irregulars recovered their sense of decorum and clapped and cheered Denzil Moriarty for what had been an expert presentation and training session, the rather ropey mock-up notwithstanding. The cheers rather surprisingly included Professor Cornstone.

As they all wearily trudged off to their well-earned dinner, Josh, Ernst and Estella made a point of sympathising with Gregor. Estella even held his hand.

"Don't worry, mate, not everyone can ride horses as well as you, can they?" said Estella.

"Yeah, that's right, Gregor, and nor can – er – er – flubbabbubbabubba," said Josh, trailing off badly.

"Pardon?" said Gregor.

"Oh, nothing," said Josh, who had actually been stuck for a further achievement or attribute that could be applied to Gregor. He didn't think that singing folk songs at the enemy would win the day.

Estella extended her show of sympathy by swinging arms with Gregor as they held hands.

"It's a good job Ellen's not here!" joked Ernst, hoping to lighten the moment. He too had sensed his friend's embarrassment. Estella chuckled and held hands with Ernst as well, while Gregor put his arm around Josh's shoulder to show he had not taken offence at his earlier hesitation.

"Cooeee!" came a call from behind.

They all looked behind them to find Big Bill, Jez, and Nathaniel Morse, all holding hands, swinging their arms and pulling silly faces. This prompted much laughter, but not from Mike. The young Valiant had been in a world of his own, deep in thought as he approached the main entrance. He suddenly felt very vulnerable, alone. At the same time, he heard someone whistle in the distance. He turned around, and there were his friends about a hundred yards away, just standing there laughing.

"Hurry up, Mike! Come on! We're goin' dahn the pub!" shouted Big Bill.

"Yeah! Come on, Mike! We're starving! What are you going in there for? Everyone's gone, remember?! Now hop to it!" added Josh.

A very silly feeling Mike turned, and ran off to join his friends as they once again accepted the hospitality of old Ma Creighton, who ran the Lonely Unicorn.

67

A Song, A Party, and a Battle

IT WAS ONLY THE SECOND TIME that Mike had been in any of the pubs in the village. He sat there, awkwardly at first, as his fellow Irregulars drank merrily away. However, he soon settled down and joined in the laughter, especially at Big Bill's endless supply of comic tales from his younger days in the East End of London.

As Mike casually looked around, he began to experience feelings of something akin to deja vu; he knew it wasn't actually this, but neither was it far off. Mike knew it had something to do with the walls and ceilings, and even the doors, they were all very familiar but he did not know why.

Josh noticed Mike's musing. "Krickenstaltz."

"What do you mean?" asked a mystified Mike.

"This place. It reminds you of Krickenstaltz, doesn't it?"

"That's it! I wondered why it seemed so familiar. But why? How?"

"It's the rock, Mike, it's priceless. When Krickenstaltz had to be magically altered when the annexes were created, the building itself had to be reduced in size, and the rocks that were cut away were brought here. In fact, an entire wall complete with its solid oak door was shipped over, all in one piece."

"Oh, I see," replied Mike, "but why is it priceless?"

"It repels evil, Mike, like Krickenstaltz does – up to a point. This place was built out of the spare rocks from Krickenstaltz, so it could be a last refuge should Hemlock Hall ever be over-run by an enemy."

"Blimey!" said Mike. "We could end up in here again later!"

"Oh dear, I'm sorry I spoke now! Come on, Mike, let's join in the singing before we spook each other out," said Josh, now regretting straying onto the topic at all.

Mike did his best not to think of last refuges and such like, and joined in '*Ilkley Moor Bah Tat*' with great gusto.

The cold but dry September night drew in, and the Irregulars walked back from the Lonely Unicorn. Laughter and hubbub had punctuated an interesting evening and had reached a crescendo during their hearty meal and copious liquid refreshments. This was now gone.

As they walked back along the lane, some of the friends talked quietly, others were silent, deep in thought as to what the nigh tmight bring.

Eventually, they reached the school grounds and were soon at the main entrance.

Professor Winch, who had joined them for a short while earlier on, had returned early and was now standing at the door, ready to greet his friends.

"Hello, everyone," he said quietly, "there's nothing more we can do but wait. Follow me to the Main Hall, I've made several jugs of coffee and I've found some chocolate digestives."

They all trooped into the hall after their boss and sat down around two tables, upon which had been placed coffee jugs and all usual accoutrements, as well as a few plates of biscuits.

The Irregulars relaxed and resurrected the fun-filled camaraderie that they had shared in the Lonely Unicorn.

However, it was no to last, with such levity again giving way to a mounting tension. This was no doubt brought on by more thoughts and fears for each of them. Would they see tomorrow? Will the powers of good prevail? Or will evil reign for a thousand years?

Josh smiled to himself as a thought crossed his mind – "It's always a thousand years!"

Professor Winch suddenly gave Mike a sly glance. He looked to one side then the other, and frowned. "You won't forget – er. . . ?"

"No, Professor, I hadn't forgotten, but it's upstairs, locked away. Shall I get it now?" asked Mike, sensing that his boss had disapproved of him not actually having Excalibur with him.

"Yes, you'd better had."

Mike went off to fetch the magical sword. On the way back he noticed that a cupboard door had been left wide open. Not only that, but a guitar was standing up against the inside wall. This, thought Mike, had been forgotten by one of the pupils in their mad rush to pack. Mike picked it up and brought it back with him. Professor Winch saw him and smiled.

"'Ello there, Mike! Are you going to sing them into submission? You'll be doing Bertie out of a job!"

Laughter once more echoed around the Main Hall.

"I thought this might help us. The tension is killing me, never mind Zenith," cracked Mike.

His friends were very surprised but still amused at this uncharacteristic piece of black humour from young Mike. After politely gesturing if he could do so, Gregor took the guitar from Mike.

"You don't mind, do you, Professor?"

"Not at all," replied Professor Winch. "The only other alternative is to listen to Daphne sing, '*I'll take the High Road*'. After her last rendition, I had no option but to take her advice and go and do just that!"

To further howls of laughter, who should come in at that moment but Daphne Llefevre. She had heard everything.

"I 'eard that! But yer, ya quite right, I ain't no Moira Anderson." (A 1960s Scottish folk singer).

"More like Billy Connolly," said Professor Cornstone. "Ow!"

After retuning the guitar, Gregor launched into a series of well-known folk songs to reenliven their flagging spirits. These included many of the same songs he'd sung at the team building event, but all still joined in, even

Professor Winch.

After a while, Gregor stopped and asked if anyone else would like to take over. All eyes turned to Big Bill Dooley for a repeat of his performance in Thornton. This was when he had gone through a Good Old Days routine, and as a bonus had made Professor Cornstone think he was the conductor of an orchestra.

"Yeah, why not. Fink I'll do summat diff'rent, though . . . hmmm . . . let's see now. . . "

Big Bill noticed Ernst was making very slight eye movements towards Estella.

"Got ya!" whispered Bill.

The big man stood up, pretended he'd stumbled, 'accidentally' brushed Estella's shoulder, and went off to address his audience.

With her eyes glazed over, Estella stood up, stayed stock still, and just stared straight ahead without blinking.

"An' now, ladies and gents! I proudly presents River Dance For Drunks!"

Bill tapped a wand on the wall, and a second later he was holding a violin in his hands.

In her dreamlike state, Estella seemed to drift to the front of the room. She turned to face the expectant gathering, still with her eyes glazed over and with her arms held tightly by her side.

Everything was set.

Bill sounded one single note, but before the dance actually got underway, Estella let out a loud burp, giggled, and said, "Oh I am sorry!" and went blank again.

Bill started up again, but this was not just one man and his violin, it was the complete orchestral accompaniment to River Dance.

Estella burst into life and started tap dancing, but she began to lean to the left, ever so slightly at first, but then lower, lower – and then she fell over onto the floor. There were howls of laughter, especially from Professor Winch. Estella, seemingly oblivious to what had happened, picked herself up, let out another but this time almighty burp, giggled, and started dancing again, this time to the right. Again she tottered and toppled, and again she fell.

By this time the Irregulars were in an uncontrollable state, banging the tables, holding their aching sides, and Gregor even fell out of his chair, but Bill had more surprises in store.

Professor Cornstone and Jez Gildebrand, both of whom had also become glassy eyed, stood and joined Estella and all three started dancing in a row. They stopped suddenly, let out three humungous burps, and then carried on as if it was part of the routine. They tottered one way, almost fell, but tottered and fell the other way instead. They arose, formed a circle and danced round and around while linking each other. However, this section of the routine didn't last long at all, due to each treading on each other's toes and banging into each other. When they were supposed to line up again,

both Edwin and Jez were flung to the far sides of the room, but it wasn't finished yet.

Edwin and Jez were eventually replaced by each of the others in turn, barring, of course, the head and his deputy. As each one sat down, they had not even been aware that they had just been part of the show and recommenced howling at those that were.

It wasn't too long before Estella was once more the only one dancing.

After eliciting one last burp from the fun loving Irregular, Bill tapped his wand, the drunken element to the routine was gone, and Estella did a complete ten minute section of the real River Dance to absolute perfection.

The routine finally came to an end.

Estella stopped and bowed to acknowledge the cheers and loud applause from her audience, but then the glazed expression faded.

Estella looked around rather sheepishly, wondering what on earth was going on. As she turned to her left, she noticed Big Bill standing by her side; she also noticed that he had a big grin on his face.

Estella finally twigged.

"Oh no! You got me! Go on, tell me! What did you make me do?!"

After everyone raved over Estella's solo performance, Professor Winch knew it was time to take the reins again.

"Ahem! Now, Big Bill, you are a sly'un and no mistake! I wish we could do this all night, folks, but alas, we cannot. However, the music is not quite finished. I propose that we finish with the Magic Anthem, but I think it would be nice if we allow young Gregor to sing it solo. Gregor?"

A surprised but delighted Gregor smiled, nodded, and checked the tuning on the guitar.

Professor Winch had long known the value of atmosphere and echo-laden acoustics. His small group, the only ones in the school, were right in the middle of the Main Hall. Although the hale and hearty renditions of most of the songs had negated the effect, Professor Winch knew that the Main Hall was a great sound chamber, with voices bouncing off the walls and echoing around the room. This would be the perfect host for a soloist, singing and playing a guitar.

Gregor was no stranger to harnessing natural acoustics to a performance either. He decided to sing the song in a higher key than normal, to pick rather than strum, and to sing it a little slower than usual.

Professor Winch gave him the nod, and as the first notes sweetly resonated around the Main Hall and the rapt Irregulars, Professor Winch dimmed what lights were on, leaving only the moonlight filtering in through the windows for illumination.

"From the Highlands and Glens. . . "

As each note resonated and as Gregor's pitch-perfect voice echoed, the poignancy of the words were carried to the souls of the mesmerised Irregulars. The air gave hope for the future, but also captured the sadness that had been, and may yet be. . .

As the last note faded and the last word was sung, the Irregulars remained still. There was no applause, no cheering or whoops of delight – just silence. It stayed silent for nearly ten minutes, with each once again deep in their own thoughts. Eventually, Professor Winch knew that reanimation was paramount.

"Coffee, anyone?"

"Yes, why not," said Professor Cornstone, wiping his eyes.

"Onions?" asked Josh.

"A field full of 'em," replied the Professor.

Jacinta leaned over to Gregor.

"You little Indian in the cupboard, you! That was beautiful!" and gave him a teary kiss.

"Thank you, Gregor, that's helped calm my nerves," said Estella, who also pecked him on the cheek. She then turned to Big Bill Dooley. "And you, ya big lummox!" But Bill wasn't left out and he too got his kiss.

Hubbub soon returned.

"Ah, Hubbub, good man, good man, more coffee for everyone I think, thank you," said Professor Winch to his faithful retainer.

Nathaniel Morse noticed Jez had spilled his coffee, which went all over the table and dripped down onto the floor. He frowned and went off to have a quick word with Ted and Franky. Jacinta was curious. On the pretext of talking to Daphne, she tried to listen in on their conversation. The only words she could make out were 'mops', and 'yes.' A smiling Nathaniel walked back over to his wife.

"Don't worry, dear, I just wanted to know if the others had promised that they would do their share of the cleaning."

Jacinta frowned.

"Huh! Fat chance! Poor Ellen."

Professor Winch just happened to glance at Mike, and saw that he was staring at nowhere in particular. Mike was miles away.

The kindly professor had a good idea of why this reverie, and why now.

"For several reasons, Mike, some long standing, some very much to do with the here and now."

"Eh? Sorry, Professor, what did you say?" said Mike, jolted out of his musing and turning to look at his headmaster.

"I mean, there are several reasons for Zenith and his mob to break away from the battle in progress, and come here instead."

"But how did you. . .?"

"I would have been surprised and even a tad disappointed if you had not been asking yourself this. Come, walk with me."

Gesturing for the others to remain, Professor Winch and Mike walked out of the room, but not out of the main door but further down the main hallway and through a door on the left. They stood on the porch of the oft' neglected west wing of the school building.

"It's all to do with our becoming fully visible, Mike. The moment news

filtered through to Zenith, he no doubt decided to do a bit of force-splitting. Yes, the centre of power is Krickenstaltz. However, if such a man or perhaps such a mind, thinks he can either kill or capture me, which he has wanted to do for years, and kill you too into the bargain, then such a man would settle for that and try anew to topple Krickenstaltz another time, another way. And don't forget, in his arrogance he may well have thought Krickenstaltz would fall to the warlocks anyway."

"But you were at Krickenstaltz. Why didn't he fight you there?"

"Ah, Mike, you are young and I am old, but age does have some advantages, and I don't mean a bus pass. It was also a taunt, a dare, a challenge. He knew Hemlock Hall was visible and therefore vulnerable. He knew if he headed straight for here, I would follow. He was right, wasn't he?"

Mike was about to say why hadn't they all just ignored him and remained at Krickenstaltz, but then realised how naive, ridiculous and stupid that that would sound, especially in the light of his demanding to come straight back when he himself had heard the news.

Despite the prize for the eventual victor, seeming (but only through cold relativity), to be slighter than that which would be gained by the ransacking of Krickenstaltz, Mike knew that there was something more at play than just the gain or loss of a magic citadel. To Mike, the emotions and intellects which made up part of the battle, albeit an unseen part, reminded him of the drama that had been played out by two fictional characters from the mind of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which were of course, Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty.

Mike smiled, wondered if Denzil was a relative, then smiled again upon remembering the evil criminal mastermind had never actually existed.

Mike glanced up and saw Professor Winch gesturing that they should go back inside to rejoin the others.

After the chit-chat and coffee had continued for just over an hour, Professor Winch announced that it was time to prepare the defence of Hemlock Hall.

"I'm sorry to break up the party, everyone, but we have to make ready for what lies ahead.

"Firstly, please make sure you all have battle-wands with you, apart from Mike, of course, who will as usual be carrying Excalibur."

Mike once more smiled to himself, as this made him feel about fifteen-hundred years old.

"As to which of us will be riding the warrior dragons . . . unless there are any problems with this, would Edwin, Mike, Big Bill and Josh, please get yourself ready. I know that is only four, but I will be the fifth rider."

Although there were gasps of astonishment at hearing this, there were no last minute complaints from the Irregulars.

"What's the rest of us to do, then, 'Eadmaster?" asked Daphne Llefevre.

"What all of you have already done with great courage and determination, my dear. I have no doubt that one or more of Zenith's men will breach this

building tonight, so the rest of you will once again form a Mobile Defence Unit, led on this occasion by the redoubtable Ezekiel. You will keep a sharp look out for any of the enemy who breaks away from the pack, undoubtedly some will try this with a view of sneaking in by surprise, so to speak.

"Please remain together at all times. Some of you may be tempted to go it alone, but on no account must you do this. I would rather the building be ransacked, than have any of you get killed because you became separated from the rest. Understood?" said Professor Winch.

"Yes, of course, Headmaster," promised Ezekiel.

The rest of the Mobile Defence Unit also gave their full assent to this dictat.

Professor Winch suddenly put his hand to his ear.

" . . . Ho-hum – yes, Brad, got you – understood. Thank you, old friend, and good luck to you. . .

"Listen, everyone. The enemy are only five miles away. The riders to the dragons, please. Ezekiel, take your troops to the entrance, but do not go outside."

"Yes, Headmaster, right away."

Ezekiel swept away with the new Mobile Defence Unit in tow.

The WSS, led by newly promoted Commodore Brad Kowalski, were in sight of Professor Zenith and The League of Mordred. Unfortunately, these were not a perfectly affable Merseybeat band of the 1960s but the dire enemy of the magic community – and ordinary folk as well, even though they would never know this.

The only reason Brad had not given the order to attack just yet, was because for the best chances of success the enemy had to be trapped between his men and the defenders of Hemlock Hall.

The enemy were only two miles away from the school. It was time.

"Into them, men!" barked Brad, and the WSS sped up to make an assault on the unsuspecting League of Mordred. "Steady! Steady! Fire!"

The WSS let rip with an initial salvo of death-bolts. Hundreds of evil riders immediately fell to their deaths. Zenith, as usual, was on his airborne sedan supported by eight of The League of Mordred. He gave the order to rise above the battle. Ostensibly this was strategy, but the reality was pure cowardice. "Turn and fight! Turn now!" demanded Zenith.

The League of Mordred, still suffering heavy losses, turned and fought back with fierce return fire. Eighteen WSS fell immediately.

Brad quickly barked out orders to regroup and form one central body of men. This was a ploy to outsmart Zenith, who in turn went for the classic Zulu tactic of the Buffalo's Horn.

"Three ranks, men, and advance!" yelled Zenith.

The League of Mordred did as they were ordered and formed two flanks and a centre rank. All three ranks began to advance on the mass of men of the WSS, or they thought they had. Brad had banked on this, and while Zenith was still yelling, had ordered his men to not only break ranks again, but to spread out and fly at varying heights, thus negating Zenith's ploy of

steamrollering the WSS. Once more, Brad barked out his orders.

"Independent firing from different heights. Fire!"

The League again began to suffer heavy losses and couldn't counter the comprehensive battle-wand assault from all directions and different heights.

To ensure the WSS stayed one step ahead, Brad yet again changed tactics. Just as Zenith gave the orders for his ranks to break and spread out, Brad did the opposite. "Re-form into three ranks, now!"

Brad's men were now in a position to pick off the scattering League of Mordred, and yet again many fell from the sky.

It was time for the enemy to retreat. Unfortunately, the only retreat possible was not back from whence they came, but onwards towards an enemy stronghold. However, the order to do so was not given by Zenith. After banging his hands down on his chair in absolute fury and breaking two of his fingers, he instructed his personal riders to about-turn and to head back to the coast. As they did so, three more WSS units deliberately kept hidden by Brad up until then, appeared as if from nowhere and advanced on the airborne contraption and its incumbent bringer of evil.

Once more Zenith gave the order to about-turn, and he too was being pushed towards the sky over Hemlock Hall. Brad knew it was time to bring in the warrior dragons and their riders. He first of all gave the order to stop firing, as further dissipation of the enemy was not now good strategy, he now needed them regrouped again, especially as they were only yards away from Hemlock Hall. Brad spoke into his new and so far unique mini-audiomagickeraph, or MAM, on his wrist.

"Gabriel! It's a go! Can you hear me, Gabriel! Go! Go! Go!"

"Understood, Brad! Come on, men! Up and fly east! Up and east!" commanded Professor Winch.

Five dragons ridden by five of the Irregulars were soon rising up to the sky.

The riders and their chosen beasts had stayed hidden in a clearing in the woods, a little beyond Shadowbrooke farm and not too far from where Denzil had taken them all through their paces. This was in readiness for the call to rise up and engage the enemy.

The airborne Magnificent Five flew in a straight line towards the melee. They were soon to understand what was meant by the dragons knowing the enemy. The instant The League of Mordred came into sight, the dragons roared and unleashed massive balls of fire at the terrified riders.

Professor Winch had hoped to be able to bring a swift end to the battle, purely through the threat posed by the dragons, but this was not to be.

Spurred on by Zenith, who ruthlessly reminded them of the hungry Thor, his pet wolf-whale, The League of Mordred tried to mount a fight-back on two fronts, but it soon became clear that they were in a hopeless position. They were again being fired at from all points after Brad had again given the order to spread out and fire at will.

"Which one's Will?" joked one of the WSS.

However, the enemy had some soldiers worth the name. A small group

fought their way through a hail of death-bolts to see if they could bring one or more of the dragons down. Professor Winch saw this and gave his instructions. "It's going to get dangerous, men. Use all of the manoeuvres that you have been taught . . . don't worry so much about what's ahead, but do watch your flanks."

Mike found himself surrounded by more than thirty of the enemy. He swooped above them, raised Excalibur, and nose-dived into them, swinging his sword and taking out several of the enemy from both flanks, but more came at him. However, those that foolishly went for a head on assault were soon reduced to ashes by a fireball, but Mike knew he couldn't just keep lunging out and hoping for the best, he needed something extra. He cast his mind back to the earlier grudge match. Bingo!

Mike took the dragon into a roll, faster than the one on his broomstick earlier on in the Arena. This generated the required momentum and Mike was able just to hold Excalibur out, negating the need to continually lash out or wave such a heavy sword around.

Mike held on one-handedly to grim life as he span faster and faster. It wasn't long before he realised that the manoeuvre was paying off, as the enemy seemed to have no comeback at all to this. Those that were brave enough were soon dead enough, sliced apart repeatedly by the razor sharp cutting edge of Excalibur.

Those that fell back came directly into the line of fire of one of Mike's friends, the dragons, the WSS, or all three. Professor Winch, upon realising Mike's valiant efforts so far and that the threat from the enemy was rapidly diminishing by the second, ordered Mike to cease his attack and just to hover some yards away from the rapidly concluding battle. He was to stay directly above the school and to prevent any breach by the enemy. Mike was understandably reluctant to leave his friends who were still battling on, but he did as he was commanded.

Professor Winch again hoped that the remaining League of Mordred would see sense. They were beaten, but there were still some willing to fight on. These surrounded the leader of the WFW, hoping to salvage some glory from what was now undoubtedly a lost cause. Wrong move.

With agility and know-how that stunned both friend and foe, the Professor took his dragon, Winston, into a series of frenzied moves: rolls, loops, dives, soaring up high, nose-dives and more, even taking Winston into reverse at ultra high-speed. Many of these manoeuvres were at bizarre angles, and just to further confound the enemy, dragon and rider would stop dead for less than a second and then shoot straight off again.

To the untrained eye, this seemed like deliberately random movements to confound. The confounding was true of course, but it was also much more than this. Every single manoeuvre, every movement to within a thousandth of an inch, was to maximise both Professor Winch's firing line, and at the same time, maximise evasion of return fire by the enemy.

One further added bonus was that the senses of the Lithuanian Warrior

Dragon are not in the least affected by racing and spinning at speed, or shooting off at bizarre angles. This meant that Winston could still easily make out the enemy, even at the same time as engaging in any such frantic manoeuvres asked of him by his rider.

Although not of their design, Edwin, Josh, and Big Bill had rather an easier time of it, but only by comparison with Mike and Professor Winch. This was because Zenith had promised huge rewards to anyone who could capture, dead or alive, both Mike and his headmaster. However, despite the main focus of the enemy being elsewhere, the three still had to fend off several strong attacks from large groups of The League of Mordred, and they did this very effectively. They did not quite have the moves of their leader and his protege, but they did work exceedingly well together.

Inspired by the grouping atop of the caravan in Thornton, Josh suggested they combine to maximise angles of fire, leaving the dragons to look after direct incoming themselves, while he and his two fellow riders kept their battle-wands firing within a strict range of degrees allotted to each. The plan was put into operation, and it didn't take long before both friend and enemy could see the results. It was a staggering success – for the defenders.

Professor Winch brought Winston to a halt. This was upon realising many of his attackers were no more or had fled. He commanded Brad to stop firing and to adopt a defensive strategy only. Any of the enemy wishing to take their chances with the eternally hungry Thor instead, were very welcome to do so.

"Any more action your way, Brad?" asked Professor Winch.

"That's a negative, Gabriel, repeat – a negative. . . NEG – A – TORY!"

Professor Winch had a quick thought: how do you stop an American using those silly Americanisms?

"A OK, Brad, return to base . . . that's a POS – IT – ORY," said Professor Winch, upon realising he couldn't and so for once went with the flow, which brought a hearty belly chuckle from Brad down the audiomagickeraph.

But all was not quite as it seemed.

Zenith had soared even higher when the dragons had joined the fight. He sensed his soft adversary had given him an escape door, and he was certainly going to take it.

Just as Zenith was about to head east and hopefully to freedom, a conversation between some of his surviving army was just coming to its conclusion.

"Do you remember what we discussed earlier, Smart?" asked Lenny Hewitson of Gilbert Smart.

"If you think it's come to that."

"It most certainly has. Are Shepherd, Kenyon, and Steele all agreed?"

"They are. So too are the Warwick mob. . . I think that's enough."

"Ready?" asked Hewitson.

"Ready!" replied Smart and the others.

Just as the airborne sedan began to turn and face eastwards so as to get

its passenger far away from the clutches of the WFW, thirty-five League of Mordred not only rose up to their master, they rose against him.

A twenty-second continuous salvo of triple death-bolts ripped into the bodies of the eight escort riders, as well as that of the evil Gemini Zenith. The riders fell to the ground, already dead. Zenith clutched his chest, gasped, and looked up to see the sneering face of Lenny Hewitson.

"Le-Le-Lenny!" he gasped. "I thought we were going to rule the wor—"

Hewitson sneered sardonically as he gazed upon his fallen master in his death throes. Zenith's eyes glazed over and he slumped forward in his chair.

"Rule the world? You? You pathetic wind-bag!"

Hewitson, as did the rest of his seditious cronies, flew off into the night sky, leaving the body of their former master floating in mid-air.

Lenny Hewitson had also unwittingly commuted both his and Bob Cousin's death sentence to a free pardon. The battle was over. Or was it?

No-one can think of absolutely everything. No-one. However, sometimes one person can think of something that their senior commanders have overlooked.

While the grounds, the skies and the buildings had all been factored into the strategies and tactics with regard to the overall defence of Hemlock Hall, no-one, not even Professor Winch, had given thought to the sewer system below the school.

The new MDU led by Ezekiel Creek had done everything asked of them – checking the building continually, sticking together at all times, and then starting all over again. However, their endeavours started on the ground, drifted up to the sky, and back down and around, but never below. . .

In the middle of a rarely used small courtyard, a sewer lid was slowly and carefully being unscrewed. A small but no doubt fit and agile member of The League of Mordred glanced through a tiny gap between the angled lid and the tarmacked ground of the courtyard. The invader now had his 'in', but just getting in unnoticed did not mean he would remain so. The latest MDU may not have been able to cover all points at all times, but this didn't mean they couldn't spot a lone invader – if they got lucky. Unfortunately for the MDU luck seemed to be currently with the enemy interloper. He saw no-one, climbed up and out, then reached back down, dragged out a broomstick and carefully replaced the sewer lid. He then carefully opened a satchel he had had slung over his shoulder, rather gingerly checked its contents, and then redid the straps. This rather mysterious intruder then had the temerity to mount his broomstick and fly almost at ground level, very slowly and in total silence, across the courtyard to a rather forlorn looking wooden side door. He dismounted and gently pushed the rotten door which just swung freely inwards – he was in the building, a much overlooked part of the building, but inside nonetheless.

He remounted, remembering a route along rarely used corridors which an old boy of the school, now a traitor of course, had given him and which

would be the best chance of infiltration without detection, and with destruction to follow, which, if not total, would at least cause a great deal of damage. This would, hopefully from the enemy's point of view, also act as a distraction from the battle for the defenders. He was actually heading for the old kitchens, a long oblong room full of ranges, and nails on the walls upon which hung a number of ancient and rather grimy pots and pans; this was considered by the traitor to be the best place for ten sticks of gelignite. Not a magical version, but plain, ordinary – and lethal – gelignite. The old kitchens it was going to be. So he thought. . .

"Stop right there! Get off the broom, put the bag down and turn and put your hands up!" came a shout from behind him.

The intruder, who had already connected the detonator wire to the pack of explosives to facilitate a fast turnaround, made a slight move as if he was going to surrender. But with his satchel still over his shoulder, he ducked his head and shot off on his broomstick along the corridor. He was so desperate to make his getaway that at no point did he realise that he was not actually being pursued. The person who had issued the cease and desist order was now leaning against the cold, cob-ridden uneven wall, chomping on one of Harry Gripweed's prize Braeburns. This was after making sure he hadn't scrumped a Chinese Flipper fruit by mistake. The intruder reached the end of the corridor and made a left turn at high speed, only to immediately find himself slammed into the wall by two other broomstick riders. One came at him head on from along the corridor he'd turned into; the other steamed right down from up near the ceiling, and smashed right into him at an angle slightly to the right at the corridor junction.

The intrusion was over as quickly as it had begun. The phantom apple chomper appeared from around the corner, threw his apple core away, surveyed the scene, and grinned.

The rider who had swooped down from above watched as her two comrades apprehended the astonished intruder, now sporting a badly bleeding head – and a very bad headache. Honey Lemon – said rider, said quietly, "At least I did it for the right reason this time, Eleanor. I am so sorry, sweetheart, please forgive me." She wasn't so quiet that she hadn't been heard by her two comrades, one of whom turned to give her an understanding smile.

However, things weren't to remain as hunky dory as things appeared to be. Firstly, without realising it, they had rode their luck with regard to how they had taken the intruder down. The impact had seen the plunger on the detonator move down, almost flush with the top edge of the blasting pack. Worse still, the plunger did not slide back to its former safe postion, instead remaining a millimeter and a millisecond away from carnage. Worse again, the defenders didn't even know of any explosives complete with a blasting pack.

While the three keen but green secret defenders of Hemlock Hall were busy congratulating themselves on their idea to install brand new microscopic

magivision security cameras which they'd placed in some of the areas they'd deemed to have been overlooked by the elders, the intruder suddenly jumped up and ran off along the corridor. The defenders were soon in pursuit but before they could stop him, the intruder had opened an old sewer hatch used in centuries gone by for disposing of kitchen waste, and jumped down into the depths. A few seconds later came a thud and a muffled scream from deep down in the deepest sewer. This was followed by a sound not unlike a stick or two of gelignite going off, well, maybe ten sticks. The drop had been far, far deeper than he had expected it to be, and as he had made a very hard landing resulting in several broken bones, he had unwittingly pressed the detonator the rest of the way down. This was at the same time as slipping on the residual detritus and falling headlong into a very deep channel of raw sewage. Thankfully the blast had been too far down and the deep channel too full of sludge to worry the building to any worthwhile degree.

Now only the three mysterious defenders remained in the dim, grubby grimy walled corridor. This three-strong alternative MDU, totally unknown to anyone else from the defenders of Krickenstaltz, went back to patrolling the near-forgotten courtyards, dungeons and disused broom cupboards of Hemlock Hall. And of course, the sewers, again, just in case. . .

As promised, Brad and his men did indeed allow the dejected League of Mordred fleeing from the scene in disarray a free passage to safety. Professor Winch did not want a single unnecessary death over and above that which had been unavoidable, and even this was too much for the kindly old man. He shed a tear, even for the fallen enemy, but he had to shake himself out of it and get on with his job.

The professor asked the dragon riders if they would kindly stay hovering a short while longer. This was to allow Brad and his force to land en masse, but not be a perceived threat to the Lithuanian Warrior Dragons. Denzil had 'forgotten' to tell the trainees that although these dragons do indeed know the enemy, they can on occasions get mixed up over who are their friends.

Mike was desperate to dismount. He was aching and tired and longed for some rest, food and sleep. What he did not realise was that he was level with the still floating sedan, belonging to the late Professor Gemini Zenith. At first, they were quite a distance away from each other, but the sedan suddenly started floating towards Mike.

All around Mike was a loud, cheery hubbub. This was caused mainly by the WSS, landing and talking things over with their friends, their commanders, and even the Irregulars. Rather ironically, these post-battle scenes acted as a distraction, allowing the sedan to get nearer and nearer to Mike without him noticing.

The sedan stopped just a few feet away from Mike, while the tired and sore young Valiant continued to muse over better times ahead.

The body of Zenith suddenly shuddered, and a black, misty form began to

leave its earthly shell behind and slowly make its way towards its hopefully new host. Zenith's ghostly arm reached out and almost touched Mike's shoulder, when Melvyn casually looked round to see what was causing the ripples of air which had flapped his ears. This was at the same time as Ezekiel Creek, scanning the skies, just in case, saw the attempted possession.

"Mike! Move, Mike! Now!"

The fellow Irregulars all looked up and were horrified to see the spirit of Zenith about to possess their friend. The other still airborne riders dashed towards Mike, but had to just as quickly back off. Melvyn had seen the body of Zenith, still slumped in his chair. It was someone he had been waiting many years to meet again. The body belonged to the man who had killed eighteen of his brothers in the Eurasian Wars many years before.

Before the spirit could take control of Mike, Melvyn lifted his head, roared, and released a tremendous ball of fire, aiming it at his already deceased arch-enemy. The fireball hit the sedan, and within a split-second the chair and its occupant were reduced to ashes which fluttered in the night breeze, and were gone. Zenith could not now return – ever. Nor could his spirit ever possess anyone ever again, because his earthly body had been destroyed before all of his spirit had left it.

Mike felt as if he was going to have a heart attack. He breathed deeply and held his aching chest. Professor Cornstone flew over, looked at Mike, and smiled.

"Just fright, lad. It'll ease soon."

Down below, the customary whooping and cheering was amplified by the thousand plus men of the WSS.

Mike flew down, dismounted, handed the reins to Denzil, and he was greeted like James Stewart in the film, '*The Spirit of St. Louis*'. He was lifted up and carried back to the main building by a group of exuberant WSS. His own friends followed, once again relieved to know that Mike Miller had survived yet another attack by Zenith, and what's more, Zenith was finally and forever – dead. At least they hoped he was.

Professor Winch was a happy man. The forces of good had won a very major victory indeed. He had, presumably, not even needed the services of the Mobile Defence Unit, Mike was safe, and his long-time adversary was no more.

Josh walked over to Mike. "All right?"

"Yeah, I think so . . . a bit sore though, I'm glad to get off that flippin' dragon!"

"Yeah, not quite as comfy as what Denzil said they'd be, but as I said earlier, he'd sell leeks to the Welsh! But – we've all got through and that's what really matters."

"Well, I dunno. The WSS took losses, you know."

At times, Josh was glad to have Mike around for reasons other than their strong friendship and his bravery, but to also be his conscience, or at least to

give his own conscience a jolt every now and again.

"You are absolutely right, Mike," said Josh. "I should have remembered that. It's terrible, absolutely terrible, but it seems to be the unavoidable price of achieving peace, as contradictory as that sounds."

Mike sighed. He knew Josh was right.

"Come on, Mike, they'll be remembered, but you must lighten up."

"I know, I know. I'm all right now, honest."

Josh ruffled Mike's already well ruffled hair, and they walked off back into the school.

Professor Winch knew it was time for a celebration.

The tables in the Main Hall were all set out for a huge feast, hurriedly sent over by both old Ma Creighton, manageress of the Lonely Unicorn, and Patricia Tansey, the near-eponymous proprietress of Patty's Patisserie.

Although all of the Irregulars had felt privileged to experience the almost solitary atmosphere a near empty building such as Hemlock Hall can generate, they were very glad to see and hear people, noise and movement return in great volume.

The Irregulars just about managed to keep two tables for themselves, as the WSS, loth to break up their units, unceremoniously reorganised things to enable up to three-hundred men to all be seated at one long table.

Those of the new Mobile Defence Unit led by Ezekiel, could do nothing but heap praise on their airborne friends. They knew that Mike and Professor Winch's actions in the field of conflict had been absolutely astounding. They also knew that the other three had used their heads and worked together well, to form a formidable airborne MDU.

The Irregulars, who only a short while earlier had been very tired and ready for bed, were well into their second wind, especially Jez. ('Oops! Awfully sorry,' said Jez).

They joshed with their compadres, the WSS, who actually had nothing but the deepest respect for their brave associates, but such was military humour they were never going to show it.

"'Ere! I bet ya that long haired fella yer 'ang round wiv does'n' even pay yer, does he?!" said a particularly cheeky private, Hughie Triggs. He was actually a great bloke, but he was never going to prove it with a comment like that.

The Irregulars were horrified. Jez saw red, stood, and went to stride over to sort him out, but Big Bill, far more used to such ribaldry (and far worse!), pleaded with him to let it be. Jez eventually sat down again, while Big Bill had a quiet word with young Hughie, which included a brief summary on anaesthetic-free amputations.

Hughie soon apologised to the long 'aired fella, as well as the whole crew. What no-one saw was Professor Winch doing his best to remain serious, and only just managing to stop himself from bursting out laughing.

Big Bill had a gleam in his eye, but this time he pretended to pretend he'd

stumbled, and rather obviously touched Estella on the shoulder.

"Not this time, Buster!" joked Estella, while Big Bill, still grinning, went back to join Jez and finish his beer. Gregor, egged on by the rest, once more became his alter ego the folk singer. He sang many of his standards, (again!), and these renditions were even more lustier than usual, courtesy of the thousand strong WSS lads who loved nothing more than a booze up and a sing-song.

It was 4.00 a.m.

68

Back from the Dead

ACCORDING TO THE FAMOUS SAYING, *One battle does not win a war*. However, one question on the minds of most of the residual (and greatly reduced) defenders of Krickenstaltz, was, would two do the job? Ren Stannich, as well as his fellow wizards and officers, one of whom would outrank him for the duration of this expected engagement, knew full well that the warlocks would be back. It didn't matter if they turned up at the Citadel with a brand new leader hastily elected after Zezk's cowardly and treacherous desertion, or if an impromptu council of war formed by the most seasoned warriors left alive after their heavy defeat, were now the ones giving the orders – they would indeed be back.

*

Renko, the soon-to-be-former cook smiled a grim smile of satisfaction. He had slaved and sweated and even frazzled in the cookhouse for the very last time. After being certain that Zezk had deserted his post – permanently, he found support from just enough of the remaining army to declare himself leader. After arranging for the privileges of rank and position which were previously enjoyed by Zezk, and before him Kerantzky, to be accorded him and his family, Renko then decided on a bold course of action, one which he believed the enemy would not expect, they would attack again, immediately – well, almost immediately. After being found hiding in the Hagelbarm forest, a ragged, bloody and shaking Zezk was dragged back unceremoniously to the warlocks' camp. Less than a minute later he was somewhat unceremoniously dead.

*

The top brass of the hotch-potch Krickenstaltz command were still in the War Room. All non-combatants had been stood down and sent home and a strict guard rota had been instigated. The guards patrolled both within the Academy itself and outside around the grounds and right along the perimeter. This would continue right up to the moment of attack by the enemy, should there be any such attack. Unfortunately for the elderly reservists, they would in that instant become front line troops. There was no other alternative.

The last (which was sadly most) of Alex's disastrous duck a l'orange had been cleared away, and the men had soon resumed discussing serious matters. "I think they will attack again immediately," said Alex, this was in reply to a question put to him by Ren Stannich. "OK, their losses were huge, but there were still a great many who escaped to fight another day, there always is with these blighters."

"Yez, I agree," replied Ren Stannich. The remainder of the small gathering, each well aware of the bloodthirsty minds of the warlocks, nodded their own agreement. "Howezzer, ve now 'az ze Magick Army, all ve need to do now iz to infuze ze battle spellzez. God 'elpz uz all. . ."

"I heartily second that," replied Alex. "Now, I suggest we try and get whatever rest we can, as short and insufficient as it will be. It would not surprise me if we are once more called to arms, and very soon."

Very soon was somewhat of an understatement. No sooner had the friends and comrades stood and pushed their chairs under the table with the view to getting at least a little shut-eye, as it's called in all military communities the globe over, than the alarm once more blared out all over the Citadel of Krickenstaltz. A scout fresh back from deep cover burst through a side door, yelling "They're coming back! They'll be at the walls in less than a minute!"

"Right, gentlemen, this is it," declared Alex, addressing the three grandees. "If you can ready yourselves on the battlements, Anthony and I will take command of the men. We are so short handed we will have to trust that the Magic Army can defend the front wall as well as the grounds. Shall we, gentlemen. . ."

"Septimuz undz Englbengl! Cum viz me, ve are to commenz ze magick infuzion now!"

While the three senior wizards rushed off to ready themselves to reanimate an army which had not fought for decades, Alex turned to his new friend, and more importantly perhaps, his SIC.

"Anthony, things will be so chaotic it will be pointless looking to each other to give or receive orders. I think for today's little garden party it's best if we split command equally, I will take half of the men to the eastern wall, and you the right."

Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne tried to suppress a smile but couldn't. East and right it was. Seconds later:

"Right, you 'orrible lot! Get yourselves on that wall now!" from Alex as he double quick-marched his allotted troops over to the east wall, and, "I say, you chaps, would you mind awfully. . . that's it. Thank you," from Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne as he sauntered across the grounds in a westerly direction.

The walls along which the men and a portion of the Magic Army were now stationed, were brand new and had been constructed to enable the strongest possible defence to be mounted. The huge steel fence, put in place shortly before the first battle, had been declared next to useless and had thus been dismantled. The new walls were made of solid stone, were six foot high, and were supplemented with sandbags and firing steps.

A still pale Professor Pendragon had reluctantly agreed to remain within the Citadel. Ren Stannich had tried to explain that they needed a reserve, just in case, but Aloysius knew it was because he would be ineffective in battle due to his weakened state, but he had diplomatically accepted Ren's decision.

With the hastily regrouped warlocks only seconds away, Ren Stannich, flanked by Engelbert Osbaldeston and Septimus Twigg, stood on the high

battlements. All three wizards had their wands outstreched. Only the initial part of the spell was going to be audible. Once this had achieved its aims, the three elderly wizards would be in psychic contact with the Magic Army. Some of the spells would be pre-set, as per decisions made after discussions with Ren, his two time-controllers and the two senior staff officers; other spells would be on the hoof, formulated within a split second in response to the flow of the battle below.

"PREPARIUS DEFENDIUM IMMINATO!"

This was from Ren Stannich. No sooner had the last echo died away than a quintuple-coloured stream of dazzling gold, jet black, purple, aquamarine and scarlet left his wand. However, it did not travel far. The five-sided magic band stopped, flush with the top of the battlements, shimmering and glistening. It seemed to be waiting, if a magical multi-coloured stream could do such a thing, but it didn't have to wait long. Septimus and Engelbert, with their eyes closed and with their faces set in total concentration, had been wordlessly casting hundreds of spells. These had commenced just before Ren had uttered his spell and carried on for a few seconds after. The same quintuple-coloured streams then erupted from their wands and travelled diagonally until they joined with the first stream issued from Ren's wand. Ren now also changed to wordless spell casting. However, he did not close his eyes, and at this point Septimus and Engelbert reopened theirs.

Similar to the initial process which had created the magic dome during the first attack – similar – but not the same, the now combined magical streams shot out at lightning speed and down towards the sleeping warriors. This was so fast that within seconds each warrior now had a magical connection with the three wizards up on the battlements. Some of these streams were direct, others made the connection via a series of shorter connecting streams, again similar to the earlier battle, but not identical.

A roar went up from both the western and eastern flanks – "THE WARLOCKS ARE HERE!"

The Magic Army came to life – fast. The initial pre-set spells resulted in one fifth of the warriors dashing over to fill the gaps in the eastern wall, thus bolstering the men from the single WSS unit, and another fifth doing the same on the western wall. While this was happening the remainder positioned themselves so they became pyramids, consisting of two warriors supporting a single warrior at the top. When this process had been completed they shot up high into the air; this was in preparation to take on the airborne warlocks, as well as those making a frontal ground assualt.

"Wait to see the whites of their eyes, boys," came the caution heard all along the eastern flank of the walls of Krickenstaltz, while on the west was heard, "I say, you chaps, anyone got a light?"

The whites of many enemy eyes were soon in view, and no pre-battle cigar was enjoyed by anyone. It was beyond pre-battle, it was battle. The first

salvos were fired by the warlocks, who were hoping a surprise blitzkrieg would totally destroy the defenders of Krickenstaltz. Unfortunately for the WSS, most of the salvo was deadly accurate and seven of their number were killed outright. Despite this, the warlocks very soon realised that there would be no rapid crushing defeat of the residual troops of Krickenstaltz. It had not taken long for Renko and his men to realise that the usual Krickenstaltz defenders were being augmented by a very large number of somewhat bizzarely attired reinforcements, and not only that, reinforcements who could, in a very strange manner, fly without broomsticks. After some deep thought, Renko now realised he knew this strange but undoubtedly magical fighting force. Although the warlocks who had fought against them before had never referred to them as the Magic Army, and would not know who or what was being referred to if someone did, Renko, and some others, did indeed know them, but as 'Ze Madzmen oz Zian'. After remembering the serious reversal he and his comrades had suffered at their hands many years before, Renko decided to remember to enjoy a commander's privilege of directing the battle from the rear.

The WSS and their magic allies opened fire. Although the WSS brought down a good number of the enemy, the Magic Army on both flanks brought down at least five times as many. Their swords also doubled as wands, and while there was distance to be considered, they simply pointed their swords at the enemy, yelled "ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!", after which a red and blue lightning bolt burst from their sword tips and reached one of the enemy in less than a nano-second, but this was not all. Each strike generated four more strikes, each also finding a target. Before the last lightning bolt from one strike had hit home, the magic warriors had issued many, many more.

They also held out their shields which deflected much of the incoming assorted salvo of death-bolts, crescent death slices and more, not only away from themselves but from their human allies and back towards the enemy. If any of the enemy were close-to, then the Magic Army used their swords in a more traditional way, but more expertly, more efficiently and more deadly than any human swordsmen in existence.

While the combined magical and human defenders of both flanks had been fighting close up with the enemy, up in the sky it had soon became clear why the airborne troops from the former guardians of Xian were in groups of three. Although they had all ascended vertically, they all now made ninety degree turns to become horizontal, each now like a three-in-one Superman racing to rescue Lois Lane from the clutches of Lex Luther. No sooner had they done this than issuing forth from each warrior's hands, feet and eyes were single silver coloured streams. Some of the streams were straight and level, some angled, some were different lengths and thicknesses and some were curved. All then combined and surrounded all three warriors within each grouping and began to form right around them in the shape of a modern day tank, the standard choice of heavy mobile firepower of non-magical armies, but these tanks were indeed magical, and their staggering

and merciless power was soon revealed. The streams partially utilised the shapes of the warriors, but where necessary, the powerful magic in play saw to it that the rest of the magical construction was completed and ready to take on the almost as huge warlock army.

Courtesy of Ren, Septimus and Engelbert, the infused spells had dictated where and how the tanks would be placed. Some stayed where they were after formation, while some ascended to different heights until a ten-tier airborne army had been created; these then moved as one, slowly, across the battleground. The rest became hunter-killers, roaming the battleground at high speed and at about a hundred feet above the ground, with their turrets scanning the battleground rapidly from left to right and up and down, looking for the enemy.

With a three strong yell of "ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!" from each magical Sherman, hundreds of fiery red and yellow shafts left the main gun of each tank at high speed and in multiple directions. As each shaft found a target, the unfortune recipient was very soon no more, consumed in a ball of flame, disintegrating to nothing in seconds. Once the shafts had done their job they simply disappeared. However, although this was indeed powerful magic, it was not precise magic. Many shafts did not find a target and these too disappeared.

Some airborne warlocks met their death, not by tank-fire, but by wand-fire and even perfectly non-magical swords, thrust deep into their chests and bellies. This tended to be the case when the enemy tried to blindside the turrets of the magical tanks, only to find that the warriors powering the tanks could just as easily let loose death-bolts from their wands and strike with swords, in amost any direction. Scores of warlocks who had made this fatal error fell from their broomsticks; the luckiest of these were dead before they hit the ground, others, yelling and screaming as they fell, were slashed to pieces by the outstretched swords of other warriors of the Magic Army as they plummeted past.

Some of the hunter-killer tanks descended rapidly to catch out any ground troops who thought they could climb through the undefended front wall and press on in relative safety along the ground to the Citadel itself. The enemy on the ground soon found that a highly deadly enemy was hovering just above them. Those that did look up were soon dead; the trouble for the warlocks here was that those who didn't were soon dead too, with the last thing they heard being "ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!"

However, the defenders were not going to have things entirely their own way. Despite such reinforcements, both the eastern and western flanks were soon breached by a great many warlocks, and just as many flew over the top, just as they had done before. No matter how many of the enemy were taken out, even ten at a time by the magic warriors, there seemed to be an endless supply of replacements. The officers and men of this hotchpotch army very soon realised that if their number had not been bolstered by the Magic Army, they would at least have been forced to surrender, but more

likely wiped out.

The battle was no longer primarily being fought on the walls, but all over the grounds and in the air. However, as each breach of the walls which saw up to fifty warlocks scamble over and fight their way through, both wall commanders barked out orders for the men to keep their positions and not turn and pursue.

"Eyes front and keep to the wall, lads! Those who've got through will soon regret it!" That was of course from Alex, but to be fair to Anthony, the Bertie Wooster method of leading hardened veterans had been readily abandoned. "Hold this wall! If any of the enemy gets through, then just make sure the next lot don't!"

The supplementary forces on both walls now changed tactics. They joined together in rows of four or five, put their shields together, raised them and pushed back any warlocks trying to break through. Many warlocks were killed outright by their own death-bolts rebounding off the shields of the magic warriors. Their magical strength saw huge mobs of the baying enemy forced back behind the wall. Some clung on but many fell. It wasn't a great drop down on the outside of the walls, but it was enough for some to fall awkwardly and break legs and ankles, and of course create an obstacle for their evil comrades coming up behind. Some of the five strong groups of the Magic Army even leaped over the wall to take the battle down onto the scrub, even into the forest bordering the Citadel.

As was always likely to happen in such a battle, some of the wall troops were forced back into the grounds. After one such breach, Alex found himself one on one with a Warlock brandishing a flail. Before Alex could use his wand the flail was swung with tremendous force, hitting him on the arm and which was immediately followed by a dull cracking sound. Alex's wand arm was broken, as was his wand. Ignoring the pain, Alex was up straightaway, but with the same warlock closing in once more. Alex was gifted one chance of staying alive. Almost on cue a magic warrior turned from the wall and stuck his sword out straight. Not believing his luck (which wasn't luck at all), Alex leapt onto the warlock, who fell back, right onto the razor sharp blade. Despite being in great pain, Alex rejoined the men at the wall, but this time his choice of weapon was a flail, held in his left hand. What he did find rather gruesome was that the Magic warrior did not dislodge the dead warlock from his sword, but carried on fighting with the warlock attached to it without it being a burden to him in the least. Not only did the warrior carry on killing a great many of the enemy with his sword, many more of the enemy found themselves being crazily assaulted by one of their comrades, albeit a dead one.

But war is war, and just because one side has incredibly superior firepower, does not mean no-one of their own side will remain unharmed. Six more WSS warriors were killed outright, five of these by enemy death-bolts, while the other had been hit with the dreaded Trepannerblast. This was the terrifying death-spell which had taken the life of Jack Robinson in the first

battle. As the WSS veteran began losing his mind, he staggered across the grounds only to be trampled to death, not by the warlocks but by one of the magic warriors who had just been severed from an airborne pyramid. The magic warrior's demise was slow, and he staggered around, seemingly sightless, and didn't even seem to notice as he trampled all over the already badly injured body of the WSS reserve. This was witnessed by the three wizards up on the battlements. There were looks of concern on their faces. This was not expected. The Magic Army were not quite as invincible as had been believed, or at least hoped. However, due to the need to keep psychically recasting spells, there was not time to discuss this worrying occurrence.

The noise was tremendous, louder than had been the case in the first engagement. Along with the shouts, yells and screams – both of fury as well as of pain and death, from both sides, there was also the Magic Army's incessant war cry of "ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!, augmenting the noise to ear-splitting levels.

At first, each terrifying cry had been just about individually audible and intelligible:

'ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!'
'ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!'
'ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!'

— but as their firepower increased in intensity, this became one, huge, unintelligible wall of blood-curdling sound. Once again, the grounds of Krickenstaltz were a sea of noise, dust, falling debris, falling bodies, all wrapped up in a light show of cosmic proportions.

Looking out of an arrow slit high up on the tower to the west end of the battlements was Professor Aloysius Pendragon. He was deathly pale, had a raging temperature, a throat which seemed to have been sliced open by razor blades, and had been vomiting violently on and off for several hours, but he could not keep away. Moments earlier he had struggled up from his sick bed, vomited, got dressed and had gone off to see if there was anything he could do. He saw that the airborne troops were controlling the battle in the sky and within the grounds very well indeed, but he was dismayed to see mounting losses from the defenders on the east and west walls. He also witnessed an increasing number of fatalaties among the Magic Army. This was a worry, and yet he knew he could not request an urgent parley with Ren and other commanders, they were still busy keeping the multi-coloured streams extant, or at the walls brandishing wands and swords, giving 'tache-twitching grimaces and going "Gercha!" very loudly at the enemy. . . but he had to do something. . .

Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne found himself pushed back away from the west wall by the shield of one of the pluckier, stronger warlocks. The warlock, managing to fend off attacks from several of the WSS and even a Magic

warrior, cleared the breach and kicked Anthony down onto the ground.

As Anthony struggled to stand, the warlock advanced and Anthony thought he was about to be sent off to Camelot by a Warlock death-bolt, that was until an arrow went straight through the warlock's chest. The warlock warrior, now dead, fell right on top of Anthony, but straightaway the secret agent now infantryman, pushed up hard and managed to roll him off again. He stood, turned toward the Citadel, put his right hand above his eyes and scanned the battlements for his saviour. He couldn't see anyone at all, but he did hear a voice – in his head.

"Eyes front, dunderhead! There's a battle going on if you care to look!"

"SSSHI-UGAR!" yelled Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne as he turned round to find two warlocks advancing on him. They had somehow bypassed one of the magic warriors and were about to do what their comrade had failed in doing. Or at least they tried. Anthony killed one stone dead with the basic death spell, while the other fell to the ground with an arrow in his back and was then sliced in two by a warrior, declaring. "ZAA-ZEENG-DAH!" as he did so.

Anthony again turned to the Citadel, but only for a split-second, and saluted. As he turned back he muttered, "Thank you, Aloysius, I owe you one – er – two in fact."

"Don't mention it," came the reply, straight into his mind. And then, as if in the distance – "Old Boy!"

Professor Pendragon knew that to try and utilise wand fire would be pointless; as we saw when attacked in the forest, the elderly academic was hopeless with a battle wand. However, the professor had been handy as an amateur archer once, and had won several archery competitons while at Lesterjester University. He had not been expecting to find what he was looking for in the Citadel's main armoury, but he would be forever grateful he had been proved wrong, as would Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne.

The defenders, much to their dismay, became aware that an increasing number of the Magic Army were rather amazingly being beaten – whether in one on one fights or from death-bolts from distance. Even five of the magic tanks had been blown out of the sky. However, despite these losses, the defenders had indeed gained a very strong upper hand.

As for the Warlocks, their losses had again been so heavy that Renko, knowing it was hopeless, cursed – loudly – and then issued a general retreat. The noise from the battle was still so loud that all he could do was pass the order on to his nearest warriors, telling them to do the same, but as Renko and his remaining army was about to race out of danger, something very strange could be seen – and heard.

Amid the cheers from the defenders as they saw the enemy about to retreat, came the now not so terrifying sounds of—

'ZAA-ZEENG-DAh'
'ZAA-ZEENG-Dah.'
'ZAA-ZEeng-dah.'

'Zaa-zeeng-dah.'
'Za-zeengh-da.'
'Za-zeeng.'
'Zaaaaaaaa. . .'
and finally 'zaaaaa.'

The Magic Army's war cry was fading away – fast. As the horrified defenders and the mystified warlocks looked on, it soon became clear why. Each and every magic warrior was evaporating. Many just turned to a silver mist where they stood or where they floated, while others fell from the sky and began evaporating when they reached the ground. The gaseous silver mists that were once proud fighting machines simply drifted off and up into the clouds.

Renko, astride his broomstick and just enough of a distance away from the battle to be relatively safe, was deep in thought. These seemingly invincible reinforcements had turned out to be no such thing; deadly while animated of course, but faded into oblivion now. So, do they about-turn and once more take on the wizard warriors of the Citadel? He still had – just about – an army worth the name. Or they do still retreat, rest and regroup yet again, and attack again later? After making a quick and rough estimate of the residual strength of the Krickenstaltz defenders, he came to his decision. He also decided to share this decision with someone who wasn't actually there, but he did not know this.

"VINCHY! ARE YOU LIZZENINGZ? VE VILL BE BACK. – UND VERY ZOON! YOU VIL NOT AZ ZEZE ZIAN CLOWNZ TO ELP YOU NEXZT TIME! IT VILL BE SSSSSCCHHKKKKKKK!"

Renko of course had finished with the ubiquitous finger across the throat gesture. It's a pity Kerantzky had not patented this bloodcurdling taunt, as all who had come after him had shamelessy copied his trademark visual and verbal threat.

There was no response from Ren or any of the commanders, which is not surprising as the three spell casters were now in a state of exhaustion. A tired, aching, wheezing Septimus held an equally exhausted Engelbert up, while feeling he was about to collapse himself. Ren had slumped against the wall. He was relieved, joyous, in a way, but not realising until that moment, just how much a body can ache after holding up a wand for over two hours while in a state of total mental concentration.

Renko, realising there was to be no response, no retort, no defiant verbals, sneered and ordered his men to turn and commence the journey back to their own camp.

While some of the men continued to fire on the enemy, both Alexandru Galleron and Anthony Ffyfe-Tremayne, as well as many of the gallant defenders, were out of it, doubled up on the ground, wheezing and coughing. Professor Pendragon observed Alex holding his arm, grimacing, and looking very pale. He realised that right here and now the men were leaderless, not

even Ren or his two colleagues could step in. He still wasn't feeling too good himself, but flu', glandular fever and tonsilitis notwithstanding, Aloysius knew someone needed to take the reins, even if just for an hour or so. After giving the order for a skeleton domicillary crew to return to their stations, even if only for a few hours while wounds were treated and food and water made available, he then, in a very loud but excruciatingly razor-bladey voice, addressed the defenders of Krickenstaltz.

"CEASE FIRING! CEASE FIRING! WELL DONE, MEN! WELL DONE! FOR NOW, STAY WHERE YOU ARE AND REFRESHMENTS WILL BE BROUGHT TO YOU. WE WILL THEN TEND TO THE SLAIN. HOPEFULLY YOU WILL SOON BE ABLE TO STAND DOWN FOR A SHORT WHILE, BUT BE WARNED – WE WILL COME UNDER ATTACK AGAIN, AND SOON. FOR NOW – STAND EASY, STEWARDS ARE RETURNING TO THEIR POSTS RIGHT NOW AND WILL REACH YOU SHORTLY."

Aloysius knew it would happen. He didn't think it was quite the right time, not if another attack was minutes, rather than days or hours away, but—

"FROM THE HIGHLANDS AND GLENS. . .!"

While the anthem gathered voices and volume, Aloysius collared several of the returning domestic and catering staff and instructed them to assist Ren, Septimus and Engelbert to their rooms. He could not let them rest long, not while there still existed an enemy so desperate to gain control of Krickenstaltz, but he did need to very urgently contact someone. . .

Professor Winch was ready to call it a night. Ezekiel and the others had already done so. He was about to tell Brad that he and his men were welcome to carry on the celebrations as long as they liked, when his old friend Aloysius Pendragon, came through on the telemagickeraph.

"Gabriel! Can you hear me?! It's Aloysius! Gabriel! Can you hear me?!"

Professor Winch rubbed his painful ear.

"Easy, old friend, I can hear you loud and clear. What's the problem?"

"It's the Magic Army, Gabriel! Something's gone dreadfully wrong! They have evaporated! Gone!"

"Oh dear, oh dear. I was worried this might happen, despite Ren's confidence. Have they all evaporated?"

"Every last one of them! Thankfully we overcame an attack by the warlocks, but that was purely down to the Magic Army, but now they're gone!. What's worse, the warlocks know what's happened and have threatened another attack! What are we going to do?!"

For the second time in less than a month, Professor Winch banged his fists down on the table and swore in Serbo-Croat.

"Gabriel! Are you all right?"

"Yes, Aloysius, yes, just about. We've been foolish, old friend, too hasty. We've totally forgotten about moving the army to a lower altitude and a

different climate. That's what's done it."

"I hadn't forgotten!"

"Why on earth didn't you say something, then?!"

"You're the boss, old fellow. I thought you had some plan to counteract the effects."

"I only wish I had, Aloysius. However, there is nothing more you can do there, but if, as you say, there's going to be yet another attack, it means I now have the unenvious task of telling Brad and his boys that there's no rest for them tonight. Please tell Ren and the others that Brad and his men will be with them as soon as possible. However, my old friend, much depends on timing. Have you any idea when you are to expect the next attack?"

"Not on when we can expect them exactly, no, but it surely won't be long. There is some news though. Our scouts have reported that Zezk has been executed and has been replaced by some chap named Renko. He actually led the warlocks in the last attack and, with the worst possible timing for us, he even witnessed the demise of the Magic Army just as he and his men were about to retreat. I've never heard of him before so we've no way of knowing if he will prove to be more effective a leader than Zezk."

"I've heard of him. During Kerantzky's reign, I once turned up as Ronaldo Blipp and actually had a meal prepared by this Renko fellow. He's a cook, but like you I can't quantify his leadership abilities either, so we'll just have to be careful."

"I wonder what he's frying tonight?"

"Zezk, probably!"

There was laughter from the two old friends and then goodbyes and good lucks were said.

Professor Winch sighed, and then mustered the courage to tell Commodore Brad Kowalski that the party was well and truly over.

Brad's face dropped upon hearing this disturbing news. If he had known that they would have to return to Krickenstaltz that night, he would not have allowed his men to indulge the way they had done and were still doing; but Brad didn't get to the rank of Commodore by shirking his duties. He went to the centre of the hall, stood on a chair, and shouted for silence.

"Listen up — you 'orrible lot!"

Professor Winch stood and watched as a very weary WSS once again took to the skies and headed east. He went back inside, and with one click of his fingers, every piece of crockery and cutlery were gone. Every scrap, spill, drip and breakage was cleaned up, and very soon the Main Hall was back to its usual state of pristine magnificence. He retired to bed for what was going to be a very short, very uneasy sleep.

Mike was already asleep, but a short while later he was awoken by what he thought were dogs barking and howling, and people shouting, but he just groaned and closed his eyes again. About an hour later his sleep was disturbed yet again.

"Mike, wake up. Mike. Please wake up. That's it. Please get dressed and follow me, quickly! Something terrible has happened."

A bleary eyed yawning Mike with his shirt hanging out, followed Professor Winch out of the dormitory, through the common room and down the corridor.

Yet again came the sound of ferocious howling; this was just as Professor Winch and the ashen-faced Irregular entered the Main Hall.

"Zo! Ze scum boy iz 'ere!"

Kerantzky was standing there, sneering, flanked by what Mike would later learn was an urban wolf-whale. Like its much larger marine relative, it had the head of a wolf with the body of a whale, although with the much reduced dimensions it seemed more like a huge walrus. It stood eight feet high. It had two huge front paws and two smaller back paws, and its claws were razor sharp. This was Ragnor, brother of Thor.

Ragnor howled, snarled and growled at the group of vanquished Irregulars; they had all been tied up and gagged and were seated around a table.

"And vot about ze girl, eh?!" shouted Kerantzky to Professor Winch. Before he could answer, a voice replied, "I'm here, you pig!"

"Ha! But ze peeg, az you say – iz now in charge – yez?"

She again called him a pig and went and stood by Professor Winch.

"Zo! You all zort zat one little stab vud kill Kerantzky, eh?! Foolz! And look at ziss 'and! It iz – 'ow you say – az gud az new – yez?"

Kerantzky held up his new prosthetic hand, made especially for him by a brilliant but highly expensive Harley Street specialist.

"You won't get away with this, Kerantzky, and you have no support. Your people have already regrouped and they have a new leader," said Professor Winch.

"Zezk?! Pah! 'E shall die for iz treachenz!"

"My dear fellow, you are behind the times, aren't you? Zezk is dead already, he has been replaced by some ambitious young chap called Renko."

"Renko?! Ze cook?! Ha! Don't you vurry zer, old friend, Renko vill be back in ze cookzen-'ouzen before you can say – er – er— "

"Jack Robinson?" prompted Professor Winch.

"Exactenz! Exactenz! Anyvay, enuf nonzenze."

Kerantzky looked to the door and shouted to a so far unseen accomplice. "Yanch?! Did you get 'im?"

A particularly loathsome, smelly warlock walked in, dragging a familiar face behind him. It was the Reverend Michael Waldrom. Professor Winch groaned. The good Reverend had not been successfully escorted back to Bucharest to catch his flight after all, but for some reason had been waylaid by the warlocks.

"Let 'im sit viz ze uzzer filth. E' 'az job to do later."

While Yanch led the Reverend Waldrom to a seat, Kerantzky strode over and forcibly turned the two friends around to face each other.

"Now, scum boy! Say 'ello to your new bride!"

"What?! Don't be ridiculous!"

The unwilling bride to be said nothing, but she bit her lip and looked down in embarrassment.

"Listen, and listen gud! I need ze Line ov Pendragon to 'elp me to fulfill my destinenz – yez? But zat iz not enuf. Ze vorlockz vill rule ze vorld – forever! Zat iz vy (looking directly at the unhappy couple), your keender and ze kinder'z kinder, vill be ze gestz ov ze vorlockz – forever!"

"You are mad, Kerantzky! What use is the Line of Pendragon to you now? The Chaotagens are no more. Leave it be!" said Professor Winch.

"Zat iz vot you zink, Vinchy! You do not know everyzingen! (Professor Winch managed a very weak smile upon hearing this). Zo, scum boy! Zo, ze young sorceress. You vill be married by ze gud vickar in ze magick ceremony in Bucharezt Cazzedral."

The Reverend Waldrom was furious.

"How dare you, sir! You are a disgrace to humanity!"

The wolf-whale growled and strained at the leash. Yanch lifted an iron bar and was ready to strike, but he was stopped by Kerantzky.

"Pah! Veddeenkz schmedeenkz!" said Kerantzky, shrugging his shoulders. "Meanz nozzing to me, but it duz to zem. Zo, scum boy! Marry zat, (pointing to the terrified bride to be), or your friends die now!"

The kindly heart of Professor Winch the Chivalrous came to the fore, but it made him lose his senses. He couldn't take the humiliation of a fine young lady any longer and went to take his wand from his pocket. Before he could do so, however, he was blown back against the wall and he slumped to the floor.

"Zo, vot iz it to be?" teased Kerantzky, as he deliberately loosened Ragnor's lead as a taster of what might be.

Professor Winch groaned, rubbed his head, and smiled to let his friends know he was OK.

His fettered friends around the table all shook their heads wildly. They really were prepared to die if they decided not to comply.

"We'll do it, but you do not harm any of our friends. If you do, then we will not co-operate, even if that means we all die anyway," said the groom in waiting, resigned to having to go through with the unholiest of marriages.

Kerantzky scratched his chin and thought for a moment. He did indeed want to have his cake and eat it, but he also appreciated the power of leverage from both points of view. This had been a contributory factor in Mike's friends remaining alive, up to that critical point.

"Agreed, scum boy! Yanch! Get zem ready to go, and don't forget ze vickar."

Yanch obeyed his master, and a few minutes later all three were sitting on an airborne sedan. Kerantzky remained a minute or two to taunt his vanquished adversaries, and to kill the redundant urban wolf-whale. He could have left it alone to allow it to feast on the Irregulars, of course, but the thing was, he liked killing things.

Yanch joined the three prisoners. He took a live rat out of his pocket and took a huge bite out of it. He slurped, crunched and dribbled and then dangled the bloodied remains in front of his sickened passengers.

"Ungerz? . . . No? . . . Oh vell."

This travesty of a human being shoved the rest in his mouth and ate the lot. The Reverend couldn't contain himself any longer.

"This is an affront to all that is good and holy!"

But the vicar was to pay for his protest. Yanch, free of his evil boss for the minute, grinned, and struck the Reverend on the back of the head with his iron bar. It wasn't quite enough to knock him out, but the good man of the cloth was subdued and cut.

The bride to be dabbed the blood away with her handkerchief. "Don't worry, Father, it's not that bad."

'Father' Waldrom just smiled but then winced in pain.

Kerantzky was ready to go. He ran out of the building, turned, aimed his battle-wand at the door, yelled "INCENDIMUNZ!", and the whole of the main entrance to Hemlock Hall was ablaze.

Kerantzky was aboard. "Schnacka! Schnacka!", he shouted, which was the signal for seven warlocks to come out of hiding around the grounds to once again be the support riders for their master's sedan.

These had all rejoined Kerantzky after he had unmercifully tortured and killed the five younger brothers of one of the men as an incentive to remain loyal. They had remained in hiding on Kerantzky's orders in case everything did not go to plan.

With an almighty jolt, the sedan shot up in the air and was away.

The vicar sensed increased fear in the young lady as they began to leave Hemlock Hall behind, and indeed, she burst into tears and began to sob her heart out. In response, the kindly vicar put his arm around her shoulders.

"Never mind, my dear, never mind. Although I don't understand any of this, it's obvious you and your friends represent the powers of good, however mysterious it is to me. I'm sure everything will turn out all right in the end, God willing."

Reverend Waldrom was also a new man. He held his other arm out and said "Room for one more!"

The groom smiled and could do nothing but place his head on the vicar's chest, although he did appreciate the gesture. They did not know it, but the comforted then received a blessing from the comforter.

Back in the Main Hall, Professor Winch, who was a little sore but otherwise unharmed, quickly untied his friends.

"Headmaster! What on earth are we going to do now?!" yelled Professor Creek.

"After careful consideration, I would say, LET'S PUT THE FIRE OUT!" replied Professor Winch.

Fire is such a danger, that wizards should never, ever rely on magic alone to extinguish it. Some still try, of course, but these tend to appear in the

obituary columns of the '*Magic Times*' not long after.

Luckily enough, there were buckets as well a hose immediately to hand. While the hose was being unravelled ready to use, bucket after bucket of water was thrown on the flames to at least control it. The now unravelled hose was turned on, and powerful jets of water soon had the fire beaten. The danger had passed.

Apart from the wooden door frame which had been reduced to ashes, and old lead fixtures on the windows to the side which had melted, the damage was minimal.

With one wave of his hand, Professor Winch created a breeze which blew the smoke and its terrible stench away from the building. A single click of his fingers soon had the Main Hall smelling of a cottage garden in full bloom.

Ezekiel smiled, and then copying his friend, waved and clicked his fingers in admiration.

"You've still got it, Gabriel!"

Professor Winch smiled and winked. He then asked those left of the Irregulars to again sit around the table.

"My my, what a turn up for the books! And this is not our only problem: I have had to send the WSS straight back to Krickenstaltz. I'm sorry to say that the Magic Army is no more."

"What?! Beaten?!" exclaimed Professor Cornstone.

"In a way, yes. They were not defeated in battle as such, in fact with their help we have had another comprehensive victory. However, and this is very tragic indeed, just as the battle was coming to its conclusion, the warriors of the Magic Army, every last one of them, just evaporated into nothing."

"But 'Eadmaster, wha' abaht Krickenstaltz?" asked a shocked Daphne.

"Don't worry, Daphne, my dear, they don't appear to be in any trouble at the moment, and the WSS will get there before nightfall," half-lied the worried professor.

"But what about this Renko bloke you mentioned? What if he and his army attack today?" asked Gregor.

"No, I don't think so," replied the still less than totally truthful Professor Winch. He didn't want to lie to such old friends and comrades, but nor did he want them worried over something that they could not influence at the moment anyway. "They took a severe beating the other day, and it will take time for them to recover. And, of course, Renko has no idea who is currently on his way back to their evil brotherhood. On that odd score, I am not sure if I am glad or if I sympathise with him. However, I think Krickenstaltz will survive, but we do need to get to Bucharest as soon as possible. The trouble is, Kerantzky will know we will do this, so we'll have to be careful."

"We won't get caught out again, Headmaster, not if I can help it!" said a grim-faced Professor Cornstone.

"That's the spirit, Edwin. Oh – erm – Ernst, would you be kind enough to fetch Excalibur and look after it for now. I think we had better reunite both sword and swordsman as soon as possible. Right, time to go, I think."

"I'll fetch the broomsticks, Headmaster," said Jacinta.

"Not today, my dear."

*

"Nice view, 'Eadmaster, yeeer," said Daphne Llefevre, looking down from twenty-thousand feet and sitting in First Class on the flight to Bucharest's Otopena Airport.

69

Here comes the Bride

AFTER A TORTUOUS rain sodden journey, Kerantzky and his guests arrived at the warlocks' camp, deep in the Hagelbarm Mountains. It was Sunday morning.

The bride and groom and the Reverend Waldrom all marched along, one behind the other with their hands tied behind their backs. They were led into one of the wattle and daub huts. Once their captors had them safely inside, they were thrown onto the ground and then left alone.

"A strange time for introductions, I know, but what is your name, young lady?" asked the Reverend Waldrom, after getting up and dusting himself down.

"Oh – er – I'm Juliette Stannich, your Holiness." Reverend Waldrom smiled and blushed.

"Just call me Michael. And I'm very pleased to meet you, sorry I can't shake your hand!"

"And I'm pleased to meet you, too."

"And you, young sir?" asked the Reverend.

"My name's Mike Miller, sir."

"Another Mike, eh? Very pleased to meet you as well, young man."

"And you, sir."

"Michael if you would. No airs and graces with me . . . well, not here, anyway!" joked the Reverend.

This time, both managed a little laugh.

"That's better! So, magic is for real, eh? Good and bad. Still, I can see in your eyes a sparkle that only the good Lord could have put there. You'll do for me."

"Thank you, Michael, that is very kind," said the bride to be.

"Thanks, Mike!" said the cheeky groom. Again, there was laughter, but they knew not to take such comic liberties too far.

A period of awkward silence ensued, with none of the three knowing quite what to say.

Both our hero and heroine were desperate to discuss what would happen next, escape plans and such, but just felt too awkward with the Reverend Waldrom being a fish out of water, so to speak. They all just remained silent and looked down at the ground to avoid any embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Kerantzky and his small band of 'loyal' men had walked further into the encampment until they had come to the largest hut. Up until very recently, this had been Kerantzky's own quarters before his power and position had been usurped, but he was now about to reclaim the title of

leader of the Warlocks of Bucharest.

They burst in and fired off a salvo of triple death-bolts. In an instant, eleven male members of Renko's family were dead. Renko's wife, mother and his four sisters ran out screaming. Renko himself was in the corner, clutching his chest and bleeding heavily. He was not even allowed the mercy of returning to a life of culinary servitude.

Renko was dead. . .

Kerantzky surveyed the scene of murder and mayhem and then turned to one of his cohorts.

"Move zat filth! Now!"

The bodies of Renko and his equally ambitious brothers were simply slung into the bushes behind the hut.

. . . Kerantzky was back. . .

The prisoners were disturbed from their musing by the sound of a motor engine. This seemed strange because one would not expect to see or even hear the sound of an engine in what was supposed to be a magic land stuck in the Middle Ages. The engine roared into life, the tyres squealed, and the noise grew louder until it was right outside the hut.

The door burst open and there stood a totally transformed Kerantzky. He was clean shaven and his hair was combed. He wore a smart, black pinstripe suit, a white shirt and a black tie. He wore a pair of highly polished brogues, and a red silk handkerchief was neatly folded into his top pocket. Although a shock to their prisoners, the Warlocks of Bucharest always dressed up like this whenever they had business in their traditional home, the city of Bucharest.

In modern times the warlocks had been forced out of the city, and for many years had had no option but to stay hidden in the wilderness and bide their time, but Kerantzky felt the day was coming soon when he would be Lord of Bucharest, all of Romania, and then the world.

Kerantzky barked out further instructions, this time in his own tongue. It soon became obvious to the three that they were about to embark on another journey, most probably to a city, and most probably that city was Bucharest. They were on their way to a wedding.

There was one silver lining to this evil cloud: Kerantzky's plans did not include dropping in for tea, biscuits and a sprinkling of death and mayhem with Ren Stannich and friends, at least not at the moment. Back home in blighty, Professor Winch had already realised this, but thought it best not to let his friends at Krickenstaltz know that they could (probably) rest easy. And after all, mused the professor, it is best to be on one's toes.

Yanch, looking like Fred Astaire at an Oscar ceremony, told them to rise and follow him. Once outside again, they were all herded into the back of a Land Rover. This was one of the original models, tough but basic, and mainly used by farmers or perhaps small building firms. There were no proper seats in the back, instead there were two long benches, one down either side. The

space in the middle was usually used for stashing a variety of small tools or pieces of equipment.

They all sat on the left side together with Yanch, who was nearest to the rear door in case they decided to jump. They were joined by four more men who sat along the opposite bench. The first three were presumably warlocks; either that, or Kerantzky was doing business with a team of brokers from the financial district of Bucharest – this was unlikely.

The fourth most certainly was not a warlock. He was tall and thin, had long grey hair and a white beard. He was dressed in a robe of red and bright green silk, and he wore open toed sandals.

As the Land Rover once again roared into life and drove away from the warlocks' camp, the two friends looked at this strange man and thought they had seen him somewhere. Merlin! But it couldn't be! Firstly, he was dead, supposedly. Secondly, he did not fit the description of the deathly pale old man that Professor Winch had described, but more like the far younger but treacherous Merlin depicted at Ayers Rock.

While their eyes were fixed on this strange fellow, the man suddenly grinned and winked. This unnerved the friends as well as the good Reverend, and so all looked out of the window instead.

Nothing more was said as the Land Rover trundled along. Sometimes this was with great difficulty, despite the vehicle's tough reputation, and the powerful engine still laboured a little as they ascended the rocky roads and paths of the Hagelbarm Mountains.

After a couple of hours, the rocking, jolting and bumping thankfully came to an end.

They were out of the mountains and were on the far flatter and more comfortable approach roads to Bucharest. Kerantzky, in the passenger seat in front, was going over in his mind as to whether or not Professor Winch and his friends presented any real threat. He concluded that they did not. This was for one simple reason:

Meletriov Kerantzky, a frequently under-rated wizard, in some forms of magic at least, had managed to go back in time to find the Merlin of King Arthur's day and persuade him to come back to present day Romania. Kerantzky had achieved this by promising Merlin riches beyond his wildest dreams. However, to earn such treasure, Merlin had had to agree to return with Kerantzky back to the future; he was of course to bring the dreaded Chaotagens with him, as well as formulating a brand new one to his (Kerantzky's) specifications.

As the Land Rover rumbled along, Kerantzky gave a grim smile of satisfaction as he mused on how his evil machinations had all seemed to easily click in to place.

Kerantzky did not envisage ever having to set off any of the original Chaotagens, knowing that just the threat of doing so would bring him universal power. He was so confident of his total superiority over his enemies, that he was almost sorry he had not left wedding invitations for

Professor Winch and his pathetic friends. He need not have worried, they were already there. . .

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It was Sunday Evening. The last Mass had long been said in the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Bucharest, and it was well past the time for the last tourists to have had a look around the one-hundred and thirty-seven year old three-naved building – apart from one group of tourists — the Irregulars. They stood silently in the shadows of the side aisle, to the right of the altar.

Professor Winch looked cautiously around and then spoke softly to his friends.

"Remember, everyone, this is a very sacred place. Please remember this as events unfold. Do not fire battle-wands, cast spells, or use any form of violence unless I give you an explicit command to do so, which I hope will not be the case. Understood?"

Everyone nodded and Excalibur was gently placed against the sidewall. They again waited patiently and silently. The silence was disturbed two hours later.

Kerantzky stormed in, while his three prisoners were led roughly along by Yanch and the other warlocks. Merlin followed behind, carrying two small cases.

"Get ze vickar up zer!" barked Kerantzky to two of his minions. "Yanch, find ze veddeenk bookz. Go! Ze 'appy couple – yez? Stand zer – do not move!"

Yanch ran off and ransacked the presbytery in order to locate copies of the wedding books. After three filing cabinets were overturned and a desk broken, he finally found a number of books entitled – '*Order of Matrimony*'. He grinned, and ran back to Kerantzky hoping it would greatly please his difficult task master.

"Clotzen! Zem two and 'im, not me – o and ze best man!"

Yanch gave his leader a sickly smile and handed the books to the bride and groom and to the Reverend Waldrom. "Er – 'oo iz ze best man?" asked Yanch, and very meekly at that.

"You iz. Stand zer!"

As this was going on, Merlin was at the back of the Cathedral and had set up one of the Chaotagens for release; this was to be done as soon as the wedding was over.

From their hiding place, the Irregulars sighed despondently, believing that King Arthur's valiant intervention now seemed pointless.

The Chaotagen in question was the one Merlin had formulated on Kerantzky's orders. It was a Power Reducing Chaotagen, which, when activated, would result in all of the world's power sources such as gas, electricity, oil, coal and even nuclear power, ceasing to be effective.

Kerantzky believed in the power of the sword. He intended to send the world back into the dark ages, which had been an era of evil glory and dominance for the Warlocks of Bucharest. If this did not do the trick and

leave him not only re-established in Bucharest but also crowned as World Emperor, he would indeed release all of the other reinstituted Chaotagens. If he failed with this, he had failed; what did his own life matter then? Kerantzky looked around the magnificent holy edifice in which he was an abomination in the Lord's eyes, befouling HIS sacred house.

Including the hidden Irregulars, there were only a total of twenty-four people inside the cathedral.

Kerantzky stood on the High Altar, held his arms out, and beamed. It was as if he believed he was addressing millions of overjoyed followers. The five followers he did have with him looked rather sheepishly at their mad leader.

The Reverend Waldrom was again beside himself with rage, but one look at the bride and groom shaking their heads was enough for him not to react in the way he felt like doing.

Kerantzky commenced his victory speech.

"Ziss iz ze day – ven I vill triumph over ze vorld! Ze vorld vill rue ze day – zey madenz ze vorlockz eatenz on zer zcraps! Zey vill rue ze day – zey laughtenz at us! — ZEY VILL FEEL A ZOUSAND YEARS OV REVENGENZ! ('There he goes!' thought Josh).

"You vill join me today – ven ze Vorlockz ov Bucharezt vill once again — RULE ZE VORLD!"

Kerantzky gave an evil grin, and again flung his arms out wide.

Although to Kerantzky, it no doubt seemed as if millions were in ecstasy, shouting, cheering and proclaiming his name, the reality was rather different. His five supporters clapped weakly, and one of them did go to shout his name, but when he realised that no-one was going to join him he just as quickly shut his mouth again.

It was time.

"Zo, Vickar – begin. And 'urry up, az ziss place makes me feel sick."

The Reverend Waldrom just couldn't help it. "This is an outrage! You can't make these good people do this! I won't do it!"

Kerantzky lifted his battle-wand. In the shadows, a regretful Professor Winch gave the order for the Irregulars to do the same.

Reverend Waldrom glared at Kerantzky, but turned away and began to study the Order of Matrimony. He froze. It was in Romanian.

"I'm awfully sorry, but I can't read this!"

"Zer iz English vershun at ze back," sneered Kerantzky.

"Oh, thought of everything, haven't you?!"

The Reverend sighed and turned the pages until he had found the English version of the Order of Matrimony.

"My dear friends (again glaring at Kerantzky), welcome today, to the Nuptial Mass of — er — er — Mr Kerantzky — I'm not a Catholic priest, you know! Not that I've got anything against catholics, but this is highly irregular!" Kerantzky was not swayed one little bit, and the bride and groom again had to intervene to prevent a bloodbath.

"Very well! Where was I? Oh yes – of Miss Juliette Maeve Stannich, and

Mister Michael Ulysses Miller. . . "

The Order of Matrimony continued as Kerantzky and his cohorts fiddled, farted and fidgeted impatiently, waiting for the ceremony to end.

The Reverend suddenly asked for the ring. Kerantzky stared at Yanch who just shrugged his shoulders, but Kerantzky noticed that Yanch was wearing rather an expensive looking diamond ring on his little finger.

Kerantzky walked across to his lowly minion. He grabbed his hand, wrenched the ring straight off his finger and handed it to the Reverend Waldrom. The bemused vicar then gave the ring back to Yanch who was still wincing with pain.

Finally, Yanch handed the ring to the groom.

After the ring was blessed, placed on the bride's finger and more prayers said, the Reverend Waldrom without smiling or any form of sincerity, said, "I now pronounce you Husband and Wife . . . Michael, you may now kiss your bride."

Both newlyweds blushed as the groom kissed the bride. That was enough for Kerantzky.

"Come – scum boy! Leave your bride for ze moment, you 'az job to do."

He reluctantly followed Kerantzky to the rear of the cathedral where Merlin had set out the phial containing the Chaotagen. Courtesy of his time-tinkering, Merlin held the previously banished Chaotagen Wand in one hand, and a parchment containing a magic incantation in the other.

"Here, Pendragon! Repair the humility your ancestor put me through! Release the Chaotagen!"

There wasn't even time to muse and smile to himself upon hearing Merlin, who had seemingly caught Kerantzky's habit of choosing the wrong word. Instead, he just stood there desperately trying to think of a way out. There wasn't one.

"Do az 'e sez!"

The two men glowered.

A third man, hiding in the side aisle, suddenly stepped out of the shadows – it was Professor Winch.

"I wouldn't make him do that if I were you, Meletriov, not if you value your life."

Kerantzky knew that Professor Winch would appear sooner or later, but he was not overly concerned.

"Pah! Vottenz do you know, eh?! You are too late! Now, scum boy, now!"

With Professor Winch surrounded by four warlocks brandishing battle-wands, scum boy knew it was hopeless. While holding the wand and avidly watched by Kerantzky and Merlin, he read from the scroll.

'DISASTERUM ENTATU ET FINITE!
FOSSFOLIUM ENTATU ET FINITE!

FLUIDATO ENTATU ET FINITE!
AEROLIUM ENTATU ET FINITE!
UNIVERSO ENERGOSO –
ET FINITE AD INFINITUM!'

The cathedral was filled with tension. Kerantzky was fraught with his lust for power. Mike and Juliette looked at each other, resigned to the worst.

The hidden Irregulars were not certain as to the extent of the power that had just been unleashed. They wondered whether the cathedral would collapse around them, or whether it was a warning shot to make the rest of the civilised world sit up and take notice. Maybe Tierra Del Fuego had just been engulfed in a firestorm, or perhaps Cleethorpes was now covered in molten ash with its residents petrified for eternity, just as they had put their wheely bins out or were on their way to the betting shop with the rent money.

Those that were gathered around the phial stared anxiously, waiting for some reaction from its powdery contents. The tension increased ten-fold. The powder slowly transformed into a blue sludge, then to a more viscous liquid, and then it began to boil!

Kerantzky was ecstatic.

"Zo, scumboy! You did vell! Soon you shall be at myzi— VOTIZ APPENING?! VOT IZ 'APPENING?!" Kerantzky was disappearing into thin air, fast. "YOU VILL PAY FOR ZISS! – YOU VILL PA—" Kerantzky was gone. Forezzer. Maybe even forever.

A rather unusually jaunty Merlin bimbled over and gingerly picked up the phial.

"Ah! Hot cream soda! Lovely!"

He took the lid off and swigged the lot.

Mike and Juliette grinned and flung their arms around each other.

The four warlocks surrounding Professor Winch were themselves surrounded by the Irregulars, who pointed their battle-wands and Excalibur directly at them. The warlocks dropped their wands and fled.

Professor Winch strode straight over to Mike and Juliette to thank them for keeping their nerve. He even put his arms around the goodly Reverend and saluted his obvious courage when facing evil.

All of the Irregulars plus a bemused but beaming Anglican vicar were in a group, gathered around Professor Winch. Although the kindly Reverend Waldrom was speechless, he still managed a weak smile.

"Excuse me Headmaster, but was all this part of your plan?" asked a dumbfounded Professor Cornstone.

Professor Winch blushed and then chuckled.

"Yes – and no! But before I explain, I think it timely that we should congratulate the happy couple."

"Headmaster! Have you lost your senses?! Mike and Juliette aren't really married! They can't be!" exclaimed Ezekiel.

"Maybe Mike and Juliette aren't, but Estella and I certainly are! Er – perhaps!"

The Irregulars turned around to see Mike slowly change into Ernst and Juliette turn into Estella.

"And don't forget about us!"

They turned back again to see Ernst turn back into Mike and Estella back into Juliette.

There was a dull thud. It had all been too much for the kindly Reverend and he had duly fainted.

"Big Bill, Jezmond, if you would be so kind, that's it," said Professor Winch. (The two titans again carried the Reverend Waldrom and gently sat him on a pew). "I know that unless I am quite insistent, you will all keep me standing here for hours asking me all sorts of questions, and that won't do at all.

"Please everyone, outside. Let us not disturb the sanctity of this holy place any longer. Our transport awaits us to take us all back to Krickenstaltz. I'm sure our good friends there will be ecstatic when they hear the good news. So, let us now dep— "

"Ahem!"

It was Merlin.

"Oh – Merlin! I am dreadfully sorry. I suppose you have got to leave us now. Thank you for coming to our aid, old friend, thank you! — until we meet again!"

To smiles, cheers and waves, Merlin was gone.

Mike smiled the broadest smile he'd smiled in weeks. He knew that to all intents and purposes, his ordeal and the ordeal suffered by many of his friends – was now over. What had started with an elaborate confidence trick by Zenith speaking through a magic budgerigar – had – after many twists and turns, ups and downs, and laughter and tears – come to a happy conclusion in the Cathedral of St. Joseph, in Bucharest.

The threat posed by Zenith had literally gone up in flames, and the dangers posed by The Warlocks of Bucharest had literally disappeared before his very eyes.

He had made many new friends. His distant cousin, although he had never even heard of him before boarding Wimpole's Magic Caravan, Professor Aloysius Pendragon. Then of course, his two very new and yet equally very dear friends, Juliette and Vincent Stannich, as well as their father and all those at Krickenstaltz. Then the amazing, hard as nails yet cuddly teddy bear that was Big Bill Dooley, and the rather scruffy but equally likeable Alex. Mike had not been with him that much, but he wished he had.

He had been privy to many deep secrets both good and bad of the magic world. Before his adventure began, he would not have dreamed in a million years that he was related to King Arthur, or that a blue-blooded English toff working for Professor Winch could pass as a deeply sinister eastern

European, ie, one Anton Lieberman.

He would never have imagined that arthritic old ladies could be at the heart of a battle and acquit themselves admirably.

Then, Estella, who was truly amazing. Tough, yet kind and loving. He had a lot to thank her for and vowed that given the moment, he would do just that. And even those he did already know, had revealed personal qualities he never knew were there. Professor Winch himself was a brilliant tactician, and when the need was there, a gambler, a risk taker, but only ever for the greater good.

Then, Jacinta Morse and her family. Nutty she may be, but she had proved to be a very loyal defender of the forces for good, as had her husband and sons. Then there was the dark horse, Jez Gildebrand. He hadn't even waited to be asked to join the fight, he had just done so.

He also had a great fondness for Barry and Fred, the caravan operators. Mike knew they had no military background whatsoever, but still, they had shown great loyalty and obedience to Professor Winch.

And then Mike smiled to himself at one event he had missed but had heard about in all its blarnified detail: The concert' at the University of Aberystwyth. He would dearly have loved to have seen the Dead Leprechauns of Tralee singing to the terrified students of the Paranormal Society.

But for a moment, his smile-inducing thoughts gave way to sadness. He still felt the loss of Marina and Laszlo very badly. He wiped away a tear at such a tragedy, just as a familiar voice spoke to him in his mind.

"Zank you for 'elping my friends, Mike, you 'ave been very brave. Do not cry, zer iz no need. Zer iz only need for – er — 'ow you say – ze booze upz! Zank you again, and ve vill meet up again von day. Oh – and Laszlo sez – vell dun too! Bye-bye, Mike."

"Bye, Marina, bye, Laszlo," whispered a tearful Mike, but he did as she asked and put the smile back on his face. It was over! It was all well and truly over!

*

Within a few hours of arriving back at Krickenstaltz, most things in the magic world had been returned to normal. All magic travel had returned. All other magic places, annexes, and so on, had been re-magimoleculised. The Citadel of Krickenstaltz had again disappeared from public view, but Hemlock Hall was to remain visible until the pupils had all returned safely. Professor Winch didn't have to do this, of course – but he wanted to pay the coach drivers a few bob more for their sterling service.

The Irregulars, not previously believing in a third wind when burning the candle at both ends, felt as if they had now burnt the middle out as well and that someone had nipped out and bought a new one – a big one.

It was party time – again.

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Soldier, Soldier, Yes, I'll marry You

THE ACADEMY AT KRICKENSTALTZ is a great place for a party, but not for well over a thousand people, and not even the use of magic can get around this limitation.

The swelling of the usual numbers of those living or working in Krickenstaltz at any one time, was of course due to the magnificent WSS and their Commander, Commodore Brad Kowalski.

It was, perhaps, just as well that the citadel's usual defenders were still on traffic and crowd control duties elsewhere, otherwise, the overcrowding would have been even worse. It did not have a huge hall such as the one at Hemlock Hall, nor were any of the other rooms suitable, nor were the gardens. There was only one thing for it, the grounds around the citadel would have to suffice.

Professor Winch, Ren, and Aloysius decided they would have a walk around and pick out at least a reasonably even patch of ground, which would be suitable for a celebration. However, their attaching of grave importance to such a triviality had their friends scratching their heads and asking, "What are they really up to?" This was a fair question because they were indeed, 'up to something.'

The first reason was not particularly important in the great order of things, but it was to the three old friends. It gave them a little time together to chinwag, reminisce, laugh and joke about the old days, the not so old days, and what had happened today.

The second, final and more important reason, was for them to discuss the possibility of someone being offered a lifelong membership of the WFW. Although the WFW is usually taken to mean the federation itself of member states, more informally it means working as an agent for them.

It didn't take long for the three old heads to smile and nod in agreement. The offer would be made.

None of the three had actually bothered in the least to survey a suitable site for the party, and were not going to do so now.

"Here?" said Professor Winch, purely because they happened to be standing where they were standing.

"Excellent!" replied Aloysius, not even looking down or around.

"Great," added Ren, carelessly. He was reading the classifieds in the '*Magic Times*', particularly the '*Catering Establishments for Sale*' column. "Must see Jean Michelle about ziss," added Ren, quietly.

"What's that, Ren?" enquired a smiling Professor Winch.

"Oh – er – shocking newz, izn't it?" (He hurriedly turned back to the

headlines).

"What news is that, Ren?"

"Yez, shocking, abzolutely shocking!"

Professor Winch sighed but then smiled. He had seen the headlines:

'Budleigh Salterton to get more hairdressers'.

The three old friends walked back and announced that the party could begin.

Thirty minutes later, about twenty yards away from the main entrance, row after row of tables had been set out with each table piled high with food and drink.

No sooner had everything been set up, than the skies opened and it began to pour down. This was the first bout of really bad weather that September, but considering the number of top class wizards and witches on hand, this was never going to be a problem. Before one plate of food was spoilt, an invisible canopy surrounded and protected the merry multitude.

There was a storm raging all around them. There were gale force winds, there was hail and sleet, and even snow fell for over an hour, but it just didn't matter. Each gust of wind simply lost its potency as it hit the invisible barrier; each drop, each hailstone, simply bounced off and down onto the ground outside. Much to the delight of the revellers, lightning bolts struck the canopy making it fizzle, but it held. The party was literally getting off with a bang.

Professor Winch allowed a couple of hours or so of boisterous camaraderie, borne out of such admirable esprit-de-corp, but he now had to call on them all to dutifully remember their fallen. After signalling for silence, he addressed the gathering:

"My friends, my friends, I won't keep you long from your well-deserved celebrations, but we have a solemn duty to perform. At Commodore Kowalski's magnanimous suggestion, I would like to ask Professor Cornstone and Sir Michael of Hemlock Hall and Krickenstaltz – to lead us all in a short remembrance of the brave men of the WSS, and their equally gallant comrades, the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment, as well as our valiant reservists and brave civilians who answered the call and tragically died in the service of not just this domain, or the WFW, but of all that is true and just.

"Let us remember, then, all of these courageous men and women who lost their lives in our recent battles against the enemy. . . Mike, Edwin, if you would be so kind. . . ?"

Mike nearly jumped out of his seat upon hearing this, as he had not been previously informed that this would be asked of him. Professor Cornstone came to the rescue, handing Mike a little card with what he was to say written on it. Beneath this was a personal message for Mike.

The personal part of the note read:

'Mike, I am heartily sorry for the anguish I have put you through since your arrival at Hemlock Hall. Through making a terrible mistake, I made you suffer when you did not deserve it. I hope and pray you can find it in your heart to forgive me. —— Professor Cornstone.'

Perhaps the professor should not have done this at that moment, because Mike coughed before he could commence the tribute. But he was not really coughing, he was doing his best to stifle his tears.

The hushed assembly waited patiently while he composed himself. He was ready.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us pay homage to the bravery of those who have lost their lives in the service of the good, those brave souls who laid down their lives for both the magic and non-magic communities. Please raise your glasses, ladies and gentlemen, and join with us in a toast: (Edwin now joined in to give the toast with Mike.) To our fallen friends! We will always remember them!" The whole assembly stood and raised their glasses. "To our fallen friends! We will always remember them!"

Everyone took a quick sip of their drink. Mike noticed Estella had a sly smile on her face and Mike knew why. What had been champagne in Mike's glass was now just soda water.

Mike continued: "Let us now look to the night sky where Arthur the True will lead these valiant men and women to the glory of Camelot. . . "

Everyone looked up and to the west. The storm was over and there was a clear moonlit sky with millions of stars shining brightly.

The image of Arthur appeared, once again holding the Magic Flag of the Magical British Isles. The spirits of the fallen, riding magnificent black chargers, gathered around their king.

Mike read on: – "Again, ladies and gentlemen, join me in a final toast to our glorious King, Arthur the True. May we be inspired to live and die with his courage, his dignity, his mercy, and his justice – as have our brave friends before us. Please raise your glasses once again: (Edwin again joined with Mike in giving this final toast). "To Arthur the True!"

Mike took another sip of his glass, and this time it was champagne! Mike wasn't certain but he thought he saw Professor Winch wink at him.

Again, the gathering rose: – "To Arthur the True!"

The spirits of the fallen rode off and most were soon beyond the horizon. The last was recognised by many of the gathering as being Private Jack Robinson of the Krickenstaltz Cavalry Regiment, but formerly of the WSS.

He stops – turns – his horse rears up in salute –
he turns again – and he is gone.

The image of Arthur remained, which puzzled most of the gathering.

Professor Winch leaned across and whispered, "Now, Mike, be so kind as to lay Excalibur flat on the table."

Mike, upon being asked earlier to ensure that he had Excalibur with him that evening, had had an idea that this would happen.

"Blimey, the old geezer wants his sword back! What a swizz!" suddenly blurted out the rather cheeky WSS private, Hughie Triggs.

After one look from Big Bill, Hughie decided not to comment further.

Mike was philosophical. He knew from the legion of stories about King Arthur that Excalibur was frequently on its way somewhere or other, such as a lake, or a pond as Vincent would say. On this occasion, it was indeed being returned to its most famed guardian, King Arthur.

Mike laid Excalibur on the table, and Professor Winch discreetly asked Gregor to join the proceedings.

While everyone looked to their king, Gregor quietly picked the opening bars to the Magic Anthem on the guitar. He sang it as sweetly as he had done the previous night, and the whole assembly, attuned to such poignancy, knew not to join in.

Gregor sang the whole song once, and then changed from picking to a strong strum, which was the cue for all to join Gregor in a full-throated rousing rendition of this truly inspiring song.

Mike looked to Excalibur and saw it begin to fade. Mike then looked to Arthur, and Excalibur began to appear in his outstretched hand.

Gregor played on for a third time.

The sword was back with its time-honoured guardian. The image of King Arthur faded, and was gone.

The final rendition of the magic anthem came to an end and everyone burst into thunderous applause.

Mike saw an opportunity to do something. He took a napkin and then deftly lifted a pen from Professor Winch's pocket without his knowing.

The professor smiled to himself. He had tried to keep still as the pen which was clipped to the inside of his pocket was wrenched free.

Mike quickly scribbled on the napkin.

'I hope we can be friends forever.
Thank you. —— Mike Miller.'

Mike slipped the napkin into Professor Cornstone's pocket without him noticing, and then expertly replaced Professor Winch's pen.

Professor Winch smiled once more.

The solemn ritual was over, and the party was once more at full tilt.

Gregor, musing on the possibility of doing some paying gigs, was once again in great demand. He launched into the more raucous standards – again, but it didn't matter. They were given an even more energetic rendition by the men of the WSS. And just like when Estella and Josh had ribbed him in Thornton, he got friendly boos off the strong Scouse contingent when the '*Leaving of Liverpool*' became the '*Leaving of Krickenstaltz*'.

Fifteen songs later, and Gregor again decided to pass the microphone.

The Irregulars immediately looked to Big Bill for one of his specials. Bill glanced around and studied the muscle-bound physiques of the many WSS lads, most of whom were far younger, and some of whom, in terms of muscles, width and height, were equal to or were even larger than himself .

"Nah! Not tonight. Yer can 'av' too much of a good fing, ya know."

The Irregulars all settled once again into just chatting amongst themselves.

Ezekiel Creek thought it the perfect opportunity for his boss to finally reveal how he had pulled off the tension-filled stunt the day before.

"Well, Gabriel, now is a good time as any. How did you arrange yesterday's little charade?" asked Ezekiel.

"And here's me thinking you had forgotten all about it! Fair enough, fair enough, pull up a sandbag, everyone, and I'll tell you the whole saga," replied Professor Winch.

"Well now . . . after the WSS had left Hemlock Hall, I was on my way up to bed, when Kerantzky burst in with some of his henchmen and that damned urban wolf-whale. They demanded I bring you all into the Main Hall, and then referred to Mike as that Pendragon scu – er – boy. Kerantzky then muttered something about the Line of Pendragon becoming his and his people's slaves for all time. This gave me an inkling of what he was up to, but what he said next sealed his own fate, eventually.

"He next demanded that I fetch Mike's girlfriend . . . that was it, I was on to him. Although one thing I didn't have to do was lie, because I just didn't know if Mike had a girlfriend (Mike blushed at hearing this), but I told him so in such a way that he immediately thought I was lying, which is what I wanted him to think. He fell for it. He shouted and screamed that I fetch, I'm sorry, my dear (looking at Juliette), 'that Stannich mare', and bring her to him straight away."

"There's no need to apologise, Professor, you didn't say it, he did, and I suppose it could have been worse," said Juliette. (Juliette was never to know that it had indeed been far worse).

"Thank you, my dear. Anyway, as I dashed off, more to formulate a plan than to acquiesce to that devil's demands, I mused on how Kerantzky could possibly have had any notion of Mike and Juliette being an item, (both youngsters blushed at this). However, I have since learned it was our latent turncoat Hector Jibb who had Kerantzky's ear. He probably thought up any old half-baked claptrap, not only to gain favour but to stay alive. I really shouldn't say this, I know, but I will find it very hard to ever forgive young Jibb for even daring to suggest such a thing to our enemy, but things being as critical as they were, I knew I had to bend the situation to our advantage. However. . .

"Now – here is the important part, so listen very carefully, as—"

"I shall say ziss only vonce!" joked Mike.

"Mike?" said Professor Winch.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Shut up."

"Yes, Professor, sorry."

" . . . As I will not explain again! So, I knew whom he meant and what he was planning to do – and that gave me a distinct advantage. Courtesy of my good friends Septimus and Engelbert, I had recently travelled back in time to assimilate the present version of me with a past version of me, and for one reason or another, things stayed that way, until today. After cottoning on to Kerantzky, I knew what I had to do, but I also needed help. Luckily, not only was I free of any warlock minders for a few precious moments, but Fred Rage the night-watchman had come running to see what was the cause of the rumpus.

"After thanking my lucky stars, I explained the necessaries to Fred while keeping as calm as I could, despite being very angry over what was happening. Knowing that speed and secrecy were paramount, as we really could have been discovered at any moment, with Fred's help I contacted my other self inside me, and told me – er – him to activate the Dual-Self control button. He, or rather the other me or whoever, may well have done this off his own bat, but I just couldn't take that chance.

"Thankfully, it didn't take too long before the process was complete, and the two of me were once more separate entities, after a fashion.

"By this time I was beside myself with Rage. . . yes, well, I advised Fred to punch out early, and the two of me set to work. We needed to fetch Mike, then Estella and Ernst, and finally, bring Juliette back as quickly as possible. Then the theatrics really began.

"My other self, himself working against time, utilised our old friend Magic-Fusion, courtesy of an Emergency Sprunchfetter spell. And then . . . well, you all saw the rest. There was a great deal of luck involved, though, such as Fred coming running and Estella and Ernst both being up and about. One was busy yelling for God down the big white telephone, while the other was taking in some night air. I won't say who was doing what."

Ernst blushed upon hearing this, rubbed his stomach and put his hand to his still throbbing head.

"We got lucky, really, we could all have easily been spotted by the warlocks as could my other me, but thankfully this did not happen."

"But how did Merlin come into the picture, Headmaster?" asked Jacinta Morse.

"Ah, well, my dear, the spirits are always with us, both good and bad, and more importantly they are timeless. Thankfully, the spirit of Merlin is now that of a penitent man, a reformed character. He saw what Kerantzky was up to, and so he stepped in to take control of his evil self from King Arthur's time. I believe those Chaotagen phials contained nothing more than lemonade powder mixed with hot water. As for that enchantment, I believe it translated to something like, 'Energy Forever' It could easily have been an advert for British Gas. It was flubber, the whole lot from start to finish."

"Why did Kerantzky evaporate, Professor?" asked Mike.

"Tut tut, Mike! All the things I've told you! Have you forgotten already?"

"Er – yes, sorry."

"Only joking, my boy, only joking. Kerantzky's demise came about because he thought he had the Chaotagens – he did not. He thought he had one of the Line of Pendragon to do his bidding – he did not.

"If we can at least imagine we can personify an ancient spell, then the spell immediately sussed out what was what, or more precisely, who was what, who had lies and malice in their heart – that sort of thing. Once this was beyond doubt, the inherent grave chastisements were triggered, and that is why it was Kerantzky, and not Merlin, who paid the ultimate price."

"Where is he now then, Professor?" asked Estella. Professor Winch just shrugged his shoulders.

While sitting quietly and listening to his headmaster relate the rest of this amazing tale, some of which he already knew inside out through having been one of the main players, Mike suddenly realised there was one thing that he was not sure of at all.

"But what about the other you, Professor?" Mike suddenly blurted out. "Where is he now? And are you sure that – er – you actually should be here, right now, and not gone back to yesterday, or tomorrow, or whatever?"

For a split-second, Mike thought he had gone a little too far, but he had no need to worry. There followed uproarious laughter from his friends, and Professor Winch himself just smiled broadly, although he also shook his head rather ruefully.

"I thought I'd got away with that one, Mike! But – although I can assure you that both of me are now back in their own proper timelines, sadly I do not have time, nor the inclination if I am to be honest, to explain how this was done. Maybe another time, eh?

"Now – I think that just about covers everything. Please do excuse me, as I need to rescue Alex and Anthony from Engelbert. The finer points of aligning Cosmic-Expansion with Magic-Fusion is not their cup of tea."

Professor Winch left the table to rescue two of his friends from a night of boredom.

The Irregulars chatted excitedly about all that they had heard, and then the atmosphere mellowed, with pleasant, hushed chatter the order of the day, or more accurately, night.

Mike came to the conclusion that it was time to talk things over with Juliette. He sat by her and smiled and blushed as he recalled the amazing revelations painted on stones inside Ayers Rock.

"Juliette, about what we saw in the cave. If things had gone wrong yesterday, which meant that we had had to go through it all for real, well, I just want you to know that I would have done my very best for you, but thankfully it did not come to that. I know those rocks showed us getting married, but the thing is, I'm too young, we're too young. You do understand, don't you. . . ?"

Juliette breathed a sigh of relief and gave a great big grin.

"Thank goodness for that, Mike! I've been meaning to tell you, but I just

couldn't find the right moment. I've already got a boyfriend, well, sort of, it's only been a day or two."

"Really?! Who?" asked Mike.

"Tobias."

"Tobias Jordache?! That's brilliant!"

"Thank you, Mike," said Juliette. "Good friends, eh. . . ?"

"Yep! Good friends," said Mike, but this did not stop him getting his trademark kiss on the cheek, but unfortunately they had been spotted.

There immediately followed whoops, hollers and cheers, and not just from his friends but the thousand strong merry men of the WSS as well.

"Wass a marrer wiv you lot?! They's wed, ain't they?! DOOO DO DO DOOO, DOOO DO DO DO DO DO DOOOO!" sung a very merry Hughie Triggs.

"Ere, you clot! That's the funeral march! It's DOOO DO DOO DOO, DOOO DO DOO DOOO, DOO DO DO DOOO, DO DO DIDDLY UM DE DOOO!" shouted his mate, Clubhouse Pete, whose real name was Private Peter McVeigh. He had earned his nickname by hanging round bars in golf clubs all around the country, hoping to get free drinks from those who had scored holes in one.

By now the entire WSS had joined in – again, so had his friends, including Professor Winch. Mike and Juliette laughed and blushed and had to wait seven minutes before the badly sung, '*Here Comes the Bride*', finally faded away.

This little interlude had set Estella thinking. She walked up to the slightly tipsy Reverend Waldrom and sat down by him. He was still bemused and more than a little worried as to how he would cope upon finally returning to his parish.

"Hello, Reverend, can I talk to you for a minute? Reverend?"

"Hmmm? Oh – oh yes, of course you can, my dear, what can I do for you?"

"Erm – I know this will seem daft, but are Ernst and I really married?"

"Oh I see! Now – er – two things stand in your way, I think, perhaps three. Firstly, you must be known to others by the names you used during the service today – are you?"

Estella just shook her head.

"Secondly, and this also explains why the practice a short while before the big day itself never counts. Did you mean it? Was the intention there before the Creator in his Holy Church. . . ?"

Again, although with a hidden sadness, Estella just shook her head.

"Then I can say without a shadow of a doubt that you and your friend are most definitely not married. Now I don't know whether that is good news, or ba—"

"But what about the third reason?" interrupted Estella, but she hadn't meant to be rude.

"Yes, most bizarre that, most bizarre. I am a Minister in the Church of England, but the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Bucharest is Roman Catholic. Now I have many great friends in the Catholic Church, people I would die for and they me, and thankfully many barriers between us have been removed

in recent years, but I still don't think I can officiate at any Roman Catholic Masses or Services. However, it's all academic, my dear, as the first two points negate the validity of the service."

"Oh, I see," said Estella but still with a look of hope in her eyes. "Thank you, Reverend, you have been most helpful."

Estella stood and rose to go back to her friends, but as she turned she bumped into Ernst. He had actually been there the whole time and had heard everything.

"You nosy so and so!" joked Estella.

But Ernst put his arms right around Estella and kissed her full on the lips.

"I love you, Estella, I always have. I'm so sorry for all those wasted years, I really am. Will you marry me?"

Estella burst into tears and buried her head in Ernst's shoulder.

"Oh great! What have I done now?" said Ernst.

"They're tears of joy, stupid! I love you, too, very, very much. And yes, I will marry you!"

"How about right now?!"

"What?! Right here and now? Right now?"

"Yes! Now now now!"

"Yes!"

Estella once more burst into tears and the two kissed again, but like their two young friends they had been spotted and overheard.

The now even more merrier men of the WSS struck up an even louder, longer and even more off-key rendition of, '*Here Comes the Bride*'.

Estella and Ernst held hands, turned to face their tormentors, and bowed.

Word got round fast. (This was Eric Word, a small, scrawny corporal and known tittle tattle).

Soon, all of their friends old and new, were queuing to reach them to offer the engaged (and imminently to be married) couple their congratulations. Estella knew how shy Ernst's brother was at such boisterousness, and so held everyone off while they went to Ren and told him personally. He shed a tear and hugged both of them.

With Ernst holding his right hand up like a traffic policeman, although smiling with it, they held the crowd back a little longer and took Juliette to one side, where there were even more tears of joy. Ernst was nearly strangled by his niece as she hugged him; she then dragged the two closer together and positively bawled as they enjoyed a three-way hug.

Then it was back to the rest of their friends.

First of all, the ladies fussed over their dear friend Estella, and then turned to Ernst, warning him he'd better look after her or else. Ernst didn't know whether they were joking or not! They weren't.

It was time to receive the warm congratulations of all their male friends present, including Mike. Both Estella and Ernst were more than a bit concerned about one particular friend they had not caught sight of – Josh – but they needn't have worried. Josh had already heard, but the two titans

had accidentally blocked his way while he was trying to reach the newly engaged couple.

"Hic! 'Ello Josh, is Mississ Myers gonnaonnaonna kill me when I get ho-hic!–omeomeome–hic!" slurred Jez.

As Jez leaned over to make way for his friend, he kept going and going, and ended up with his face in a bowl of trifle.

Josh smirked at Big Bill, who in turn grinned and said, "Ere! Nuffin' ter do wiv me this time!"

Josh finally made it to the front and gave Estella a big hug.

"Congratulations, Ezzie! But I've got to be honest, I never did like you. It took me ages to persuade Ernst to get you to stop bugging me! Cost me a fortune it did!"

"You cheeky devil!" retorted Estella, but she still gave her good friend a kiss on the cheek.

Josh turned to Ernst, smiled, and offered him his hand. He then thought again and gave him a great big bear hug.

"Thanks, Josh, that means a lot to me. We'll always be friends from now on, eh. . . ?"

"I've got news for you, me old pal, we always have been."

"Thanks, mate," said Ernst.

Not long after Ernst and Estella had been congratulated by everyone, they felt a little silly as they realised that they had not yet gone back to the Reverend to ask if he could, or would, marry them immediately. They took Reverend Waldrom over to a quiet corner, put their request to him and awaited his answer.

"Hold on, you two, I don't want to put a dampener on things, but as I said earlier, technically I can't. (Their faces dropped upon hearing this). However, technicalities never stopped our glorious founder, so all may not be lost. Do both of you at least believe. . . ?"

"Yes, your Reverend, with all my heart," replied Estella.

"Without a shadow of a doubt," stated Ernst.

Both had meant what they had said, and had not just given the right answers so as to get their wish.

"Well OK then!" replied Reverend Waldrom, with a big beaming smile on his face. "As it happens, I've still got the Order of Matrimony from earlier today. Now – er – could you ask your boss for a bit of order?"

Estella excitedly pushed her way through to Professor Winch, who was being ribbed by Alex for not being able to drive a car. Estella whispered in his ear, not only to say that the wedding would be there and then, but would he kindly perform a certain duty.

Professor Winch smiled, shed a tear, and hugged Estella. He then made his way to the end table, stood on a chair and asked for quiet.

A minute later, a huge cheer went up as everyone realised that not only were they celebrating peace, but that they were guests at a wedding party, and that Professor Winch was to give the blushing bride away.

Although none were in traditional dress for the occasion, it didn't matter a jot.

Ernst had a slight problem – who should be best man? He wanted very badly to ask Josh but felt that it should perhaps be Gregor instead, because of their friendship and service together in recent years. Gregor smiled, shook his head, and directed Ernst over to Josh.

"Are you sure?" asked Ernst.

"Yep!" replied Gregor. "I sense forgiveness and renewal in the air between the three of you. I just know it's important for you to go that extra mile. Besides, if you get divorced and remarried, you can always ask me next time!"

"You, my friend, have spent too many years in barrack rooms! Thank you, Gregor."

Ernst then went and asked Josh, who immediately gave Ernst yet another bear hug either of the big fellas would have been proud of, and punched the air.

"Is that a yes, then?!" joked Ernst.

Along with Juliette, all of the ladies were bridesmaids, although with their craggy faces, rounded forms and world weary minds of most of them, perhaps they were really Matrons of Honour.

Mike was cajoled into being the page boy, but this was only after forcing the concession of a change in title to Senior Page Boy, thus hopefully vanquishing the image of his somehow being akin to Little Lord Fauntleroy.

Big Bill provided the music, by magic of course but without any tomfoolery.

To the proper version of, '*Here Comes the Bride*', Professor Winch walked Estella up the hastily arranged aisle and on towards the top table.

The Reverend Waldrom, feeling very ecumenical indeed with his Roman Catholic Order of Matrimony booklet, yet again commenced the Marriage Service for Estella and Ernst, but this time it was for real – this time with everyone smiling – this time in an atmosphere of love and peace.

It came time for Josh to provide the ring. He went white. He did not have one. Estella suddenly had a thought, she held up her hand – and there was Yanch's ring, still on her finger from the earlier practice run. She quickly pulled it off, passed it to the Senior Page Boy, who passed it to Josh, who passed it to Ernst, who again placed it on Estella's finger. The Reverend Waldrom continued, while a bemused congregation looked on.

Soon, they were pronounced husband and wife, this time for real. Ernst kissed Estella – and the WSS just about managed to contain themselves but still led the happy congregation in thunderous applause for the happy couple.

Big Bill again struck up traditional wedding music.

Ernst and Estella walked back down the aisle, but upon realising that due to the combined nature of both the service and the celebration, did an about-turn and walked straight back up to the top table. Toasts were proposed, bouquets presented, speeches given, and then it was back to the party.

A couple of hours later, Mike just had to call it a night. Two parties and

three battles in a row with hardly any sleep in between was just too much. Although his friends couldn't hear him, he pointlessly shouted "Goodnight!", and walked off, back to the Citadel of Krickenstaltz, but Estella and Ernst saw him and dashed after him.

"Mike! Hang on!" Mike stopped while they caught up. "I know you are tired, Mike, but we won't be a mo'," said Estella. "We just want to say thank you, if it wasn't for you, Mike, we would never have found each other again."

"And if it wasn't for your incredible bravery on many occasions, we certainly wouldn't be standing here right now. So thank you, Mike, you're a good friend."

Mike smiled at both of them.

"And I would like to thank you, Estella. You were there for me in Thornton and you've been here for me ever since. And you, Ernst, you've also been a good friend as have the others, and I needed that, because I didn't always feel as brave as you think I did – inside. . . "

He shook Ernst's hand which then turned into a big hug, and Estella went to kiss Mike on the cheek. Mike suddenly refound his impishness, ducked, and Estella kissed fresh air, while Mike turned and kissed Ernst on the cheek instead.

"Goodnight!" He shouted as he ran off to some well-deserved sleep.

"Goodnight to you 'n' all, you cheeky monkey!" shouted Estella, while Ernst just laughed.

Mr and Mrs Stannich walked back to the celebrations, just as one of the happy revellers activated Bertie the Jukebox. The resulting cacophony drifted over the ground and could be heard plainly right around and throughout the citadel.

"Where has he been?!" mused Mike, as he got into bed. It didn't take long at all for the young Irregular to drift off into a deep, deep sleep. . .

Some time later, Mike was back in Professor Winch's office.

"Well done, my lad! That was the toughest Sabbatical we've ever set, and you've passed with flying colours! For your amazing endeavours, I'm proud to present you with a brand new pencil set. Congratulations, my boy!"

Mike was devastated.

"So none of it was real, then?!"

"Nope!"

"Zenith, Blackpool, Thornton, Krickenstaltz, King Arthur? All faked?"

"Yep!"

"You old fraud! You put me through all of this for a lousy rotten pencil set?!"

"See here, Mike! Mike! MIKE. . . !"

" . . . Mike, my boy! Wake up! We're going into Bucharest for a day out! Up, up, up!" It was Josh.

71

Friends

IT WAS MONDAY MORNING. Professor Winch was standing with Mike and Juliette by the sixth oak door.

Mike felt happy but awkward. He wanted to thank everyone and say special goodbyes to all of his friends and fellow Irregulars, and many more besides, but this had proved an impossibility. To make up for this, he had decided to write to everyone once he was back in school, but he also had a nice surprise lined up. He had been given permission by Professor Winch to team up with a fellow pupil, Tobias Jordache, to work on a special project. Tobias had nearly fallen out of his chair after he had been called up on the telemagickeraph.

As well as being Juliette's boyfriend, Tobias was a keen photographer. Once over the shock of Mike speaking into his mind, he had agreed to help Mike put together a photograph album of the Irregulars.

Firstly, Tobias would do individual portraits of each of them, but then, without any one of his friends knowing the others would be there, do a special group photograph of them all at a surprise reunion dinner at Christmas. Professor Stannich had agreed to provide the most recent photographs of both Marina and Laszlo to use as an inset, as Mike knew he just could not leave them out.

Apart from Professor Winch, all those who had permanent business at Hemlock Hall had already returned. All of the others, most of whom Mike had spent varying degrees of time with and a few he hadn't got to know at all, were all by the oak door waiting to say goodbye.

Juliette said her goodbyes to her family and gave her Aunt Estella a very special hug.

"Ready, you two?" asked Professor Winch. "Ready, Professor." "Hemlock Hall!"

Unlike Mike's recent unauthorised transmutation back to school when he reappeared outside the main entrance, on this occasion they all found themselves in Professor Winch's office.

"Ah, we're back. Good, good! Erm – Juliette, I need to speak to Mike alone for a few minutes, would you be so kind as to go straight to your common room. . . ? I'm sorry that you will find it empty, but the rest of the children are not due back until later."

"No problem, Headmaster. I'll read a book. Thank you."

"Thank you, my dear," said Professor Winch.

The professor waited until the door was closed and Juliette had gone before speaking further.

"First of all, Mike, I would like to shake your hand: thank you for all that you have done for our beleaguered community. Thank you." Professor Winch held out his hand, Mike did likewise, and the two shook hands warmly. "Such rare courage, my boy, such rare courage," continued Professor Winch (at which Mike blushed). "So much so, I am going to make you an offer, which you can most certainly refuse if you wish, but I sincerely hope that you do not.

"Competition for cadetships in the WFW is fierce, very fierce indeed, but in exceptional circumstances we can reserve places for up to three years in advance. Would you like to reserve your place, Mike?"

"Well, Headmaster, I might, if I knew what you meant, exactly. Do you mean like the WSS?"

"No, Mike, they are elite troops, certainly – but they are the Military. I mean agents like Josh, or Estella and Ernst and the others; they are all WFW agents working for me and directly to me. It's a hard life, but I think, in fact I *know* you have got what it takes. So, Mike, what do you think?"

"Where do I sign?!"

"That's the spirit, Michael! Welcome aboard!"

"Why? Are we on a ship?" asked Mike, doing his best to keep a straight face but not succeeding due to the pair of them bursting out laughing.

After a minute or so, Mike wanted to return to serious mode, at least for a few moments.

"Headmaster, something has been puzzling me."

"I thought it was, Mike. Well, fire away, what can I help you with?"

"Everyone's been thanking me, but I'm not sure if I've done anything over and above what the others did. I feel a bit of a fraud, to be honest."

"So does every true hero, Mike, believe me. What is the natural thing to do for one who is so brave, is totally beyond most others. That does not mean the vast majority of people are dishonourable in any way, it just means that a few, a very few, have been blessed with total selflessness – you are one of those people."

"But wouldn't the outcome have been the same if I had never been involved, or if I had been killed along the way?"

Professor Winch stroked his chin. He not so much frowned as adopted a countenance which suggested deep thoughts which needed sifting before answering. He also turned from Mike and walked towards the window, placing both hands on the sill.

"No, Mike, you were the key to it all. Even the moments you felt like a passenger and not the driver, so to speak, it was still all to do with you."

"I'm not sure I understand, Headmaster, I wish I did."

"OK, Mike, look at it this way. . . "

Professor Winch turned back and craned his neck to one side and stared up, squinting at the ceiling. Mike burst out laughing, despite him wanting to remain serious to get to the bottom of everything.

"Only joking, Mike. Right, for reasons which we – er – may never totally

understand, you became Zenith's arch-enemy. His plans to reclaim power involved you . . . he may have wanted the world but he certainly wanted to wreak vengeance on you, but only after helping him to power. The same for the warlocks. You became their special enemy after confounding them, you were also instrumental in their demise . . . as to Zenith's last chance of life of sorts – never mind victory – was ironically why he did, indeed, become consigned to that unspeakable place, forever. . . "

"Cleethorpes?" suggested Mike.

It was Professor Winch's turn to chuckle.

"Very good that, Mike, I'll have to remember that one!" He was still chuckling as he slowly paced the room.

"Anyway, his spirit might have lived on if he had not chosen you as the one to possess, but choose you he did. For his troubles, he, or at least his earthly remains, were incinerated by a type of enemy who does not, and never will know the meaning of the word mercy.

"As for the warlocks, as I explained last night, they thought they had you in their power – they did not. Ultimately, Mike, and maybe helped along by events as they unfolded, it was all about you – not Aloysius, or anyone else for that matter – only you. You must always remember this, Mike, although I for one don't think you'll ever forget it. You may not be the initial reason for an enemy to declare war, however, if you are somehow inveigled into the fray, you then have a responsibility to defend all that is good, all that are good, so that good may prevail – that spirit, Mike, you have in abundance. You were given Excalibur, not because you were the kin of someone so noble – but because you *are* noble – so Mike — Mike?!"

Mike came back into Professor Winch's office.

"I'm awfully sorry, Headmaster, I thought you had finished."

"The sooner you join Alex and Anthony the better!"

Mike had only hidden behind the door while Professor Winch waxed lyrical, and so his headmaster and possible future boss did not have to repeat himself.

Mike thanked him and then dashed off to catch up with Juliette, but just as quickly dashed back again as he had forgotten his bag. The door was still open, and Mike couldn't help but overhear the conversation Professor Winch was having on the telemagickeraph.

" . . . And thank you, Tom, and pass on my eternal thanks to Colm and Honey. You all did a good job tailing that blaggard Jibb.

"As for here, I'm confident that should any of Professor Zenith's men had got through, you three would have been an admirable addition to the Mobile Defence Unit. Where did you hide, by the way? . . . A cupboard? . . . All three of you? . . . Well well! And I never knew you were even in the building! (The Professor's right hand was momentarily behind his back, but he wasn't totally feigning ignorance. He had actually observed them sneaking over Harry Gripweed's back wall just before the battle, but as Tom didn't have the heart to tell him there had been a breach, he was never to know of the

timely actions of Tom, Colm and Honey).

" . . . Kerantzky? You weren't to know, neither – er – did I for that matter. You never know, it may have been for the best you had all left before he turned up.

" . . . What's that? . . . Your guitar? That bloody guitar again! . . . Well, what the devil did you bring it along with you for?! . . . Yes, yes, don't worry, I'll contact Gregor for you. . .

"OK, Tom, thanks again – to all of you. Bye for now. "

Mike was absolutely stunned to find that two old boys and an old girl had helped catch a traitor on the run, and then, without being asked or prompted, had secretly bolstered their little fighting force – not directly, of course, but as surprise reinforcements if the situation had warranted it. To Mike, this reminded him of a former captain and sly tactician of the Camelot House Empires team – the one and only Tom Carpenter. If that was a surprise, then to find that Colm Casper and Honey Lemon had also been involved was a massive shock. You may remember that these two muscle-bound bullies had not only been sent off after a vicious attack on a younger, smaller pupil during an Empires game, but had been expelled for their generally bad behaviour.

Mike also didn't know that Professor Winch had continued to work with the disgraced students and their families long after they had left, and his efforts had paid off handsomely. Colm was now an accountant, and Honey was a PT instructor at Glastonbury Prison.

Although it had taken longer than originally planned by the professor, the two reformed characters had become all that they could be, and had sworn to fight to the bitter end for the professor and their old school, once they had heard of the attacks from the enemy.

"Your bag, Mike, was it. . . ?" said Professor Winch.

Mike had simply walked in without thinking, totally taken by what he had overheard.

"Um? Oh yes, sorry – my bag, yes. . . "

"Mike, I must remind you that if you have overheard anything that was not really for you to hear, you must keep it confidential. . . "

"Um – confidential. . . ? No, no, sorry, Honey, nothing like that. Well, must go – bye. . . "

Professor Winch again smiled as Mike went back to the Camelot common room.

"Hey up! '*Stress-Testing and Load-Bearing Parameters for Three Tonne Transporter Brooms*'? Scintillating," said Mike, espying the title of Juliette's book.

"I know, Mike, I know, but I've been bored stiff, I can't wait for the others to come back."

"Or Tobias, you mean!" joshed Mike.

"Well, yeah," blushed Juliette, who playfully hit Mike with her book.

The two became listless as they waited for their friends to arrive back at

school, but Mike had an idea.

"I know, let's go and see Josh."

"Will he mind? He might be busy," said Juliette.

"Knowing Josh, he'll use any excuse to get out of stacking shelves," replied Mike.

A few minutes later they walked into Aunt Hattie's Sweet Emporium. They found Josh sitting and talking to Big Bill Dooley, surrounded by dozens of unopened sweet cartons which Josh had promised his aunt would be sorted out that afternoon.

"Hello, you two, bored as well?" asked Josh, after looking up to see who had just entered the shop.

"Yeah," said Mike, "I can't wait for the others to get back. Hiya, Bill."

"Well stretch me out on a rack and call the Archbishop! It's the 'Oneymooners!" said Big Bill Dooley, turning round in his chair.

Mike laughed out loud at this, but Juliette could only blush and say quietly, "Hello, Mr Dooley."

"Fanks, but none of that wiv me! Bill to me friends, young lady!"

Juliette can be very shy at times, and sometimes this leaves her feeling vulnerable. Big Bill, the Cockney rough diamond, is never, ever, deliberately rude – rough, yes, but never rude and he was mortified with himself when he saw Juliette's face drop. She blushed and a single tear rolled down her face. Unfortunately, through her quieter upbringing she did not have an appreciation of such ribald barrack room joshery of most of the Irregulars. Even though Bill's words had had no malice to them whatsoever, they seemed to have had to Juliette.

"Oh, I am sorry, darlin', I can sound 'orrible at times, but I don't mean to be, 'onest."

Juliette looked up and saw the kindest, most caring eyes she had ever seen and she managed a smile.

"It's me, Mr Doo – er – Bill. It's just me, sorry."

"Sorry, schmorry, let's 'ave a chinwag! Come on, sit down, the bofe ov yer. Let's 'ave a cuppa char an' a larf! I finks we all needs it after the las' few days."

Josh unceremoniously kicked the cartons out of the way and fetched two more chairs from the corner. Mike was glad that Aunt Hattie did not appear to be home.

Juliette quickly settled down and was soon laughing out loud at some of the crazy things both Josh and Big Bill had got up to in times past. And in turn, Juliette was even able to tell them both about the embarrassing episode in Blackpool:

" . . . So, stupid me ran out screaming into the pub next door, found Dad, and yelled, 'Professor Zenith is sawing a girl in half! You've got to stop him!'"

Big Bill, Josh, as well as Mike roared with laughter. Big Bill collapsed on the floor, holding his stomach and his ribs as he rolled around. Mike was initially laughing at the memory of when he had first heard the tale himself, but he

now laughed anew at the sight of this leviathan of a man rolling around the floor in an uncontrollable fit of the giggles, similar to himself in the dining rooms.

Juliette just about stayed in her chair as she roared and screeched away like a chimp on laughing gas. Josh fell off his seat as well, and kicked over a carton of crisps which split open and covered the floor, as well as the others who still laughed on and on.

Juliette, who usually liked to keep herself smart, was now covered in crisps and cardboard, but she didn't mind. Her nervousness had gone, for good.

"JOSH BEECHAM!" came a shout.

Mike, Juliette and even Big Bill were on their way back to school in an instant.

*

It was almost time for the rest of the school to return. Mike and Juliette stood with all the staff and friends who had already returned, and strained their eyes to see if they could spot the coaches in the distance.

Professor Ezekiel Creek, who, the others thought must have the vision of a puma, broke into a big grin. "At last! Here they come!"

The others couldn't see a thing, but sure enough, ten minutes later, the convoy of coaches pulled up at the main entrance.

The entrance area was very soon a sea of noise as the whole school returned.

In the Camelot common room, the whole house wanted in on the gory details of the desperate battle to save the school against rampaging wolf-whales. (Vincent Stannich had held court on both the outward and return journeys). When they knew Mike was having none of it, the hustle and bustle last seen when packing up to go, was back again while everyone unpacked.

Now Juliette didn't mean to do it, but when Mike suggested that he would treat them all to a slap up meal at Patty's Patisserie, she immediately did a three-way high five with Abigail and Madeline, despite only moments before asking Tobias Jordache if he wanted to go for a walk.

Mike noticed how disappointed Tobias was, and so thought he'd let him know he was very welcome to come along, too.

"Hey, Tobias!"

"Yes, Mike?"

"Come along, mate, we haven't got all day!"

"Brill!" shouted Tobias.

Madeline then took Mike by surprise. "And what about Trevor?!"

"Who's Trevor?!"

"Trevor Ash, the new boy! Well, new to you, I suppose. My boyfriend!"

"Blinkin' 'eck! Any other news you'd all like to share with me?!"

"Well?!" insisted Madeline.

Mike, not having a clue as to whose head would pop up, simply shouted in the general direction of the lumpen masses still sorting out sweaty socks.

"Hey, Trevor!"

"Yeah – er – Ike?!" said a tall, athletic boy, who only seconds earlier had accidentally spilt custard, jelly, hundreds and thousands, and a big splodge of cream over the side of his face.

"Come along, mate, we haven't got all day!"

"Yeah, right on!"

"And it's Mike!"

"Sorry – a trifle deaf!"

Mike thought that was it, but another voice spoke up. "What about – er – Rosie. . . ?"

"Vince?"

"Yeah, Mike?"

"Shut up."

"OK, Mike, sorry."

Dutch was determined not to be left out, but he had missed the moment.

"What about Ethel?"

No-one answered.

Mike suddenly had a bad thought. "Where's Leo?"

"Eef I aff."

Leo had supposedly been unpacking, but had come across a previously unspotted pork pie. Mike sighed as Leo grinned, still with bits of meat and pastry sticking out of his mouth.

Mike, with his suddenly extended gang of friends, finally left the building to commence the walk to the cafe. It was warm, sunny and dry, like most of the days had been that September.

Mike noticed that Madeline and Juliette were walking hand in hand with Trevor and Tobias. He turned to say something to the lads, only to find them hand in hand, swinging their arms and smiling inanely. He laughed, but found someone had suddenly held his hand. Thinking it was Vincent messing about, he looked to his left and was ready to tell him to get lost, but it was Sarah Biddles who did not care a jot that she had not been invited. Sarah then looked back, spotted Hyacinth who was at the entrance talking with Luke and Adam, and smiled and waved. Hyacinth laughed and waved back to her good friend.

Sarah turned to Mike.

"Don't worry, Mike, you won't be lonely, I'll keep you company."

Mike blushed, but he didn't let go of her hand. However, he did stop and muse for a moment. He then turned round to face the school, with Sarah feeling a tad confused as she was wheeled around with him. "Oy! You three—FOUR! Wanna come with us?!"

A delighted Hyacinth, Luke and Adam, and Holly who had just come out on to the porch as Mike had cupped his hands to shout, rushed to catch up.

Sarah smiled and said, "D'ya know, Mike, my dad'd be chuffed with you, he's good natured as well. You always want to include people rather than act all cliquey. I wish my friends at home were like you."

"No probs. After what we've all been through, friends need to stick

together even more," said the profound and very mature Mike.

Sarah did not verbally reply to this, but did think that the goings-on in Patagonia must have been terrible. Mike then found, but to no surprise of course, that Madeline had taken his other arm.

It didn't take long. . .

Using the grass verges for extra width, fourteen youngsters were strung out in a line across the winding lane, all linked. This was of course, followed by the time-honoured and out of tune refrain. . .

'Do not forsake me, oh, my darlin' . . . on this our wedding day. . .'

Whether it was to allow Trevor to learn all of the words, or whether it was because they liked the song so much, or both, mattered not; they all sang the whole song over and over. It was only when they had rounded the final bend of the lane and the bay windows of Patty's Pattiserie had come into view, did the famed movie theme song come to a crescenduous but still out of tune conclusion.

The friends broke from their comical formation into twos and threes, laughing heartily and carelessly, and trooped into the café.

"Hey, Mike! Am I glad you're payin'! I'm discumstarverated!" said the cheeky Leo.

Everyone, including Mike, laughed even louder.

*

Next morning their first lesson was combined sciences.

"You've missed an awful lot of work, Miller! Don't expect any favours off me! I want you up to date by Friday, even if you stay up all night for the rest of the week! Right, class, I want all those red cabbages dug up, cleaned and cut. I'm having hotpot for my dinner."

Some things never change, thought Mike, but he thought he saw Professor Cornstone smile – or was that the light playing tricks?

Yeeer!

Proof